

## Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Sammelwerk / collection

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ferber, I., & Schwebel, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives* (Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts, 2). Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110339963>

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## **Lament in Jewish Thought**

# **Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts**



**Edited by  
Vivian Liska**

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## **Volume 2**

# Lament in Jewish Thought

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Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives

Edited by  
Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel

**DE GRUYTER**



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ISBN 978-3-11-033382-4

e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-033996-3

e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-039531-0

ISSN 2199-6962

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

#### **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2014 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

Cover image: Les Lamentations de Jérémie (Lamentations, III, 1-9);

Copyright: © Chagall® – SABAM BELGIUM 2014

Typesetting: Meta Systems Publishing & Printservices GmbH, Wustermark

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

☺ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

## Acknowledgments

This volume results from a fruitful collaboration, not only between us, the editors, but among numerous friends and colleagues without whom the publication of this book would not have been possible. First and foremost, we would like to thank Vivian Liska, who has been the benefactor and supporter of this project from the very beginning. It was Vivian who first introduced us to one another, sparking a longstanding correspondence, which led to the organization of a conference on lament in Jewish thought, hosted by Vivian at the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp in 2012. Vivian also presided over the production of this volume as general editor of the book series 'Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts.' Above all, she is for us an invaluable interlocutor and friend. We thank the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp for providing support for the preparation of this volume. We also thank the participants of the Antwerp conference for a lively discussion, and for their contributions to this volume. We are grateful to Leora Batnitzky, who gave the closing remarks at the Antwerp conference, and who generously contributed the thoughtful Preface to this volume. Lina Barouch is not only the co-translator of Scholem's texts on lament, included in this volume, but she is also a dear friend, with whom we have had many valuable conversations on lament. For his exquisite attentiveness to language, his efficiency and good cheer, we thank Jim Gibbons. Last but not least, we are grateful to Ulrike Krauss and Katja Lehming of De Gruyter for their support and guidance throughout the production of this book. We hope that the enthusiasm we feel for the ideas contained in this volume will be transmitted to its readers.

Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel



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# Frequently Used Abbreviations

The list below contains references for frequently cited works keyed to abbreviations. For the reader's convenience, the works from this list cited in each essay are also included in the individual bibliographies that are provided at the end of each chapter. For multivolume works, the abbreviation in the text is immediately followed by a numeral to indicate which volume is being referenced (e.g., *SW1*, *Tb2*, etc.).

## New English translations of works by Gershom Scholem

- Job* "Job's Lamentation." 1918. Trans. Paula Schwebel. 321–323 in this volume. German original of Scholem's translation is "Hiobs Klage," *Tb2* 544–547.
- Lament* "On Lament and Lamentation." 1917–1918. Trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. 313–319 in this volume. For German original, see *Klage* below.

## Other works

- Arcades* Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- CC* Walter Benjamin. "On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." *SW1* (see below) 116–220.
- CSB* Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940*. Trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre. New York: Schocken Books, 1989.
- CWB* Walter Benjamin. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- GS* Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 7 vols. Ed. R. Tiedemann et al. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1991.
- Klage* Gershom Scholem. "Über Klage und Klagelied." 1917–1918. *Tb2* 128–133. For English translation, see *Lament* above.
- Language* Walter Benjamin. "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *SW1* 62–74. For German original, see *Sprache* below.
- LY* Gershom Scholem. *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*. Ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- OG* Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 1925, pub. 1928; trans. 1977. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.
- Sprache* Walter Benjamin. "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen." 1916. *GS2.1* 140–157.

- SW* Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. 4 vols. Michael Jennings et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1996–2003.
- Tb* Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.
- WGF* Gershom Scholem. *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975. For English translation, see *WSF*.
- WSF* Gershom Scholem. *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981. Rprtd. New York: New York Review Books, 2003. For German original, see *WGF*.

## Preface

In his essay of 1917–1918, “On Lament and Lamentation,” newly published in English in this volume, Gershom Scholem writes: “Every lament can be expressed as poetry, since its particular liminality between the linguistic realms, its tragic paradox, makes it so. (This is also why Hebrew has only one word both for lament [*Klage*] and lamentation [*Klagelied*]: *Kinah*)” (*Lament*, 317). As an anguished cry, lament, as Scholem notes, stands between language and silence, between expression and annihilation. As an expression of crippling pain in the face of an almost unspeakable reality, lament also asks but does not answer a philosophical and theological question: how can this be? Lament’s poetic expression performs its own inexpressibility. Can such torment have any meaning save its expression of meaning’s destruction? Lament’s present moment stands on the threshold of its past. But this threshold is an abyss: there is no passing between what was – history – and what is now – the memory of history’s annihilation.

Scholem pointedly describes the meeting between the self-annihilation of language and expression as a border: “For whereas every language is always a positive expression of a being, and [lament’s] infinity resides in the two bordering lands of the revealed and the silenced [*Verschwiegenen*], such that it actually stretches out over both realms, this language is different from any other language in that it remains throughout on the border [*Grenze*], exactly on the border between these two realms” (*Lament*, 313). From an intellectual perspective, to consider lament is to stand on the multiple borders of lament’s liminality, its in-betweeness. But we cannot stand on more than one border at a time. So it is that this volume’s essays approach the topic of lament from multiple borders, but also by necessity from one border at a time.

While this volume takes a multi-pronged approach to lament, the essays are united in that they all wrestle with the question of how to think about lament [*Klage*], not in order to settle on a single definition but rather to grapple with lament’s fundamentally paradoxical nature. What is this paradox? It begins with the basic ambiguity of lament, which is captured in the first word of the book of Lamentations: *eikhah*, how? As Scholem puts it, “there is hardly any other word in human languages that cries and falls silent more than the Hebrew word *אֵיכָה* (*eikhah*) [how]” (*Lament*, 318). An accusation [*Anklage*], as opposed to a lament [*Klage*], demands and expects a response, even if it does not receive one. While an accusation suggests that an explanation is possible, lament’s how, its *אֵיכָה*/*eikhah*, is an anguished cry that suggests that no answer can suffice. For this reason, lament’s outpouring of anguish negates itself in its expression. As Scholem writes: “Thus mourning partakes in language,

but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language” (*Lament*, 316). As Caroline Sauter explains Scholem’s comment, “the language of mourning – which finds its peculiar and precarious expression in lament – is a language that aims at its self-annihilation, and thus at silence, without, however, ever achieving it, because it is caught up in ‘expressing’ mourning.”

The language of the book of Lamentations epitomizes the border between the revealed and the silent, or, to put it in more theological terms, the border between God’s revelation and God’s silence in the face of the people of Israel’s annihilation. Focusing on the leitmotiv *ein menachem* [no consolation] in the first chapter of Lamentations, Eli Schonfeld’s essay explores what he calls the “*aporia* of consolation”: “Authentic consolation is susceptible to emerge only at the moment when the inconsolable nature of evil is being accepted and verbalized. The book of Lamentations activates this *aporia*: consolation can be suggested only through its absence, through its negation.” Moshe Halbertal, similarly, reflects on the final lines of the book of Lamentations and specifically the phrase “*ki im*.” The penultimate verse reads: “Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, And Let us come back; Renew our days as of old.” “*Ki im*” immediately follows. As Halbertal notes, “*ki im*” can mean both “but” and “unless.” The translation of this phrase radically changes the meaning of the final line and hence the conclusion of Lamentations. Is it “But you have rejected us” or is it “Unless you have rejected us”? This ambiguous language, not in the least unusual in the Hebrew Bible, evinces the border that is lament.

Agata Bielik-Robson considers Job’s lament and interprets Scholem’s claim that lament is a border language by showing that lament is on the border between a world of mythical immanence and a religious worldview, in which an exceptional figure – Job – dares to step out of this immanence and provoke a response from God. As a border language, lament is an undecidable state, since it is not yet clear whether the cry that breaks free from tragic silence will be met with an answer (only God can answer lament), or whether it will sink back into silence. Sigrid Weigel moves beyond the Bible to emphasize the connection between Scholem’s discussion of lament to his poetic writings, his own poems as well as his poetic theory. Weigel presents this poetic “facet” of Scholem’s work not as something that should be contrasted with his well-known work on the Kabbalah, but as a complementary part of this very work. Bernd Witte also moves beyond Scholem’s account of biblical lament to consider Scholem’s treatment of silence in relation to his Zionism and his theory of language. Galili Shahar extends the discussion of lament and silence by considering the relationship between lament and love in Franz Rosenzweig’s commentary on Judah Halevi’s poem “Zion ha-lo tishali.” In particular, Shahar explores

Rosenzweig's suppression of the Arabic "silent syllable" in his translations of Halevi's liturgical poetry, and his theory of translation.

Lament's border is not only textual. Lament is also performative and embodied. As Galit Hasan-Rokem argues, Scholem's claim that lament "is language of the border itself" extends beyond the literary character of the book of Lamentations. Emphasizing the predominance of gendered metaphors in the book of Lamentations (widow, bereaved mother, and virgin), Hasan-Rokem rightly notes: "Women are assigned to scout the borderlands of the known and the unknown, life and death." Vered Madar's essay in this volume, reflecting her fieldwork experience and study of Yemeni Jewish women's lamenting in Israel, strikingly complements Hasan-Rokem's more theoretical and historical points.

The essays in this volume also connect Scholem's claims about lament to some of his important conversations with his contemporaries. "On Lament and Lamentation" is of course a response to Benjamin's "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," and several essays in this volume address the relation between Scholem's and Benjamin's views of language. Scholem's account of lament calls into question Benjamin's account of the continuity between the language of human beings (finite languages) and the language of the divine (absolute language). As Paula Schwebel points out, "the language of lament is not simply a language of destruction; for Scholem regards the ruins of lament as the extroversion of an introverted symbolism – as the fall of an expressionless truth into both knowledge and history." Here Scholem would seem to come into greater proximity to Benjamin's views of history and messianism. Rebecca Comay also establishes important points regarding the unique structure of lament as a form of expression, dealt with not only in the linguistic context but also in a historical and cultural context. Comay offers a phenomenology of lament in relation to Benjamin's idea of the Baroque and Shakespeare's treatment of Hamlet's relation to death.

Daniel Weidner focuses on the key idea of the "poetic afterlife" in Benjamin and Scholem, as well as the formal characteristics of elegy, that inform Scholem's discussion of the poetic language of lament. The shared assumptions between Scholem and Benjamin are brought into focus in Adam Lipszyc's comparison not of Scholem and Benjamin but rather of Celan, Gadamer, and Scholem. As Lipszyc shows, perhaps the greatest challenge to Scholem's conception, indeed theology, of lament comes from Celan. Lipszyc's powerful analysis of Celan's celebrated poem "Tenebrae" raises profound doubts not only about Gadamer's disturbingly Christological reading of the poem but also about Scholem's notion of lament, which, Lipszyc shows, is fundamentally theological even in its insistence upon silence. Scholem, like Benjamin, still



links lament to revelation and a messianic promise, while Celan's focus is on "the terrifying, singular moment of abysmal loss."

We have already noted some of the ways that the essays in this volume bring Scholem's musings on lament into conversation with Benjamin, Cohen, Celan, Gadamer, and Rosenzweig. Illit Ferber further adumbrates Scholem's evocative description of lament as "Grenze ... zwischen ... des Offenbaren und des Verschwiegenen" [the border ... between ... the revealed and the silenced] by showing the indisputable connection between Scholem's account of the borderlines of lament and Immanuel Kant's claims about reason and its boundaries. This comparison is not only of historical interest but also shows that boundaries are not just limits: they also create relations.

The above paragraphs are meant to give the reader a mere glimpse of the riches to be found in the essays in this volume. I will end this introduction with just a brief reflection on what is perhaps the central ambiguity at the heart of lament: its relation to hope. For Scholem and the book of Lamentations, lament is not fully consumed by absolute loss and annihilation. In his essay on lament, Scholem alludes to this with a German pun: "Die unendliche Gewalt, mit der jedes Wort sich selbst verneint und in die Unendlichkeit des Schweigens zurücksinkt, in der seine Leere zur Lehre wird" (*Klage*, 132): "the infinite force with which each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence, in which the word's emptiness [*Leere*] becomes teaching [*Lehre*]" (*Lament*, 318). Of what does or can this teaching consist? Scholem answers, "The teaching that is not expressed, nor alluded to in lament, but that is kept silent, is silence itself" (*Lament*, 316). By way of conclusion, I'd like to suggest that the silence of lament exists in a paradoxical and perhaps even dialectical relationship to hope. Vivian Liska (2014) has recently noted the centrality of Scholem's (and Kafka's and Benjamin's) notion of deferral [*Aufschub*], which Scholem, in his writings on Kafka and Job, links to lament. As Scholem writes, "Deferral in the word, the linguistic principle of lament" [*Verstummen: Aufschub im Worte, das sprachliche Prinzip der Klage*; *Tb2*, 365]. Lament is a deferral of death. Lamenting is the closest we come to death in expressing the annihilation of ourselves and of our world. In lament, we do not die or choose to die. As Scholem states elsewhere, "Acting in deferral saves from death" [*Im Aufschub handeln erettet vom Tod*: *Tb2*, 534]. Paradoxically, lament as the acknowledgement of the annihilation of the world as we knew it, and perhaps even lament as the desire to die, leaves open the tiniest glimmer of hope that things will be otherwise.

# Bibliography

## Works keyed to abbreviations

- Klage* Gershom Scholem. “Über Klage und Klagelied.” 1917–1918. *Tb* 2 128–133. For English translation, see *Lament* below.
- Lament* “On Lament and Lamentation.” Trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. 13–19 in this volume. For German original, see *Klage* above.
- Tb* Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923: Zweiter Halbband 1917–1923*. 2 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.

## Other reference

- Liska, Vivian. “Kafka’s Other Job.” *The Book of Job: Aesthetics, Ethics, Hermeneutics*. Ed. Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.



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## Section One: **Lament and Consolation**



Moshe Halbertal

## ***Eikhah* and the Stance of Lamentation**

What is the human and religious stance implied by lament, and what is the relationship between mourning, eulogizing, and lamenting? Who is the addressee of the lament, and how does lament relate to language as a medium of its expression? Exploring these questions within Jewish tradition has to take its starting point from the lament [*kinah*] in the biblical book of Lamentations, known as the Scroll of *Eikhah*, a book whose echoes reverberate in all subsequent medieval and modern Jewish liturgical lamentations.

The key to the lamenter's stance is concealed in one word – *eikh* or *eikhah*, “how” – a word that opens the Scroll of Lamentations and reappears at crucial junctures within it: “How [*Eikhah*] lonely sits the city, once great with people.”<sup>1</sup> In this opening the scroll follows a common biblical trope, since in most of the biblical *kinot* the *eikh* plays a prominent role. In its first appearance the *eikh* is used in David's lament over the death of Jonathan at the hands of *Plishtim*: “Your glory, O Israel, Lies slain on your heights; How [*eikh*] have the mighty fallen!” (Samuel 2.19). And much later in Ezekiel's vivid and horrifying prophecy of the fall of Tyre, the *eikh* plays a pivotal role: “And they shall intone a *kinah* over you, and shall say to you: *Eikh* [How] you have perished, you who peopled from the seas” (Ezekiel 26.17). Subsequent Jewish lamentations, from those of the great sixth-century poet Eliezer ha-Kalir to the eleventh-century medieval Ashkenazi lamentations following the massacres of the Crusades, would come back again and again to this haunting *eikhah* to express the basic stance of the lamenter.

The biblical *eikh* is not a locution aimed at seeking information, in the way that “how” is used by a modern speaker, asking, for example, “How do you say ‘table’ in French?” and so on. Examining two biblical “hows,” uttered by Moses and Joseph, respectively, will illuminate the particular biblical use of *eikh*: “But Moses appealed to the Lord, saying, ‘The Israelites would not listen to me; how [*eikh*] then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech’” (Exodus 6.12). Moses is not looking for information from God, he is making a rhetorical argument that uses “how” as a term of contrast – if the people of Israel don't listen to me, *how* would Pharaoh the great evil king listen to me, who is anyhow impeded in speech! A question mark shouldn't follow this “how,” and if there is one it must immediately be followed by an exclamation

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of biblical verses are based on the Jewish Publication Society Bible, with my minor changes.

mark. Similarly, Joseph's resistance to the urgings of Potiphar's wife to sleep with her is accompanied by a resounding rhetorical "how": "But he refused. He said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. *How* then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?'" (Genesis 39.8–9; my emphasis). The biblical "how" should always be accompanied by a "then" or a "could" – "how then," or "how could." It is in the sense of a bewildered protest that the "how" is used in the lamentation, always accompanied by a claim that makes the event astonishing and unexplainable: "How [*Eikh*] have the mighty fallen?!" Emphasis must be placed on the mightiness of the fallen. In the opening Scroll of Lamentations the *Eikhah* is again used by way of contrast: "How lonely sits the city, once great with people." If the city hadn't once been great with people, the sting of the bewildered cry – "how lonely" – would have been much less painful. It is the contrast that situates the lamenter in the stance of bewildered protest, or perhaps bewildered outrage, or perhaps bewildered brokenness. The lamenter is not seeking an explanation, his "how" in its particular biblical usage precedes the why; it might as well trump it altogether.

Eulogy [*hesped*] is a reaction to a loss invoked in the response of Abraham to the death of Sarah, and that of the sons of Jacob who bewailed the day of their father's burial. These are moment of great sadness and sorrow but not of lament. The responses to the deaths of Sarah and Jacob lack the element of bewilderment – old people are supposed to die, this is the way of the world. The bewildered protest implied in the "how" of lament would be inappropriate here. But the death of Jonathan, the mighty young hero, was a shattering moment, and Jerusalem, the beautiful populous city, should not have been devastated. The "how" of the lament expresses not a loss, but a trauma; it is an expression of the undermining of our capacity to read reality as a whole. In its more acute form such a "how" is an expression of the trauma of abuse, in which the affliction originates from the hand of the father who was supposed to be the protector, providing loving shelter from the sorrows of the world. Abuse undermines the basic trust involved in understanding the world and in forming expectations; it therefore resides on the borders of madness. In the second chapter of the Scroll of Lamentations, which begins as well with an *eikhah*, God is described as the enemy: "He bent his bow like an enemy, posed His right hand like foe. He slew all who delighted the eye. He poured out His wrath like fire in the Tent of Fair Zion" (Lamentations 2.4). The bewilderment of the first "how," referring to the destruction of the great, seemingly secure city, shows the trauma of the event. It came down from the hand of a supposedly loyal protector. Destruction is experienced as an instance of abuse.

A mourner experiences loneliness. His beloved is gone, he has lost the umbilical cord that had bound him to the world. His state of solitude is intensified by the immense gulf between his inner experience of loss and the world around him, which seems to proceed as always, with no moment of pause, as if nothing had happened. It is no wonder that in the Talmud the rituals of mourning are modeled after the practices of the outcast and the banned. The mourner doesn't shave or bathe, doesn't wear clean clothes, and is not allowed to leave his home; he loses his social persona, and withdraws in solitude from the world. The consolers who come to the mourner try to woo him back to the world; they extend their hands to him as if to replace the hand that had been stretched to him from the world but is there no more. They share in his pain, providing him with an echo of his inner experience of grief, affirming some parallel between his inner state and the outside world. They are supposed to bring him back to the world to redeem him from his solitude.

The lamenter endures a completely different experience of solitude. Her loneliness is portrayed immediately after the initial "how" of the lament in the first verse of the Scroll of Lamentations: "how lonely sits the city." Loneliness is the first thing that comes after the initial "how." The solitude of the lamenter is very different from that of the mourner; it is grounded in a complete inability to read reality or the world. The lamenter has no comfort, since comforters are also suspect. If God can become the enemy, then *who* can be trusted? "There is none to comfort her from all of her friends; all of her allies have betrayed her. They have become her foes" (Lamentations 1.2). The maddening aspect of this kind of abuse is that it has been inflicted at home, where protection should have been the norm. It causes a complete loss of the capacity to read reality.

From reading the complex and rich liturgical poetry of lament one thing becomes clear. Lamentation is not a state of shock in which the bearer of devastation or its witness surrenders to muteness, or lapses into utter silence. Lament doesn't reside in the realm of the ineffable, having recourse only to the broken pre-linguistic syllables of pain such as "oy" or "vay." In lamentation, language operates in full gear, reality doesn't make sense anymore, everyone has betrayed, but language has stayed intact; it is the only weapon left. The posture of bewildered, isolated protest sharpens the expressive capacities; over generations of lamentation liturgy, poetry unfortunately has reached an insurmountable height. The author of the Scroll (like so many other poetic expressions of lamentations following his form) organizes his laments in alphabetical order, as if to enlist the full spectrum of language in his defiant mode, as if to say: "Here I am, not in shock, not at all mute. I will call upon all available linguistic resources to declare my truth. Since everything was destroyed there is nothing to lose but what is left of my integrity." Lamentation has a wise



quality of reflection in which the lamenter's ability to penetrate and describe her experiences are not blurred by excruciating pain.

Careful study of the Scroll of Lamentations reveals what is perhaps the most striking feature of this resonating "how." In its bewildered mode it aims, as well, to address and undermine the ways in which the tradition attempts to make sense of pain and destruction. In its approach to theodicy – the main traditional structure of making sense of suffering – the Scroll of Lamentations takes a very deep and original position. Unlike the other great challenger of theodicy – the book of Job – in Lamentations there is no denial of sin. Job's defiance is based on his confidence in his innocence, an innocence affirmed by God himself at the end of the book. In his call for justice, Job seeks an explanation and perhaps an apology; he was punished for no reason, he is innocent. But the author of Lamentations does not deny the fact of sin. Jerusalem was indeed corrupt (it is difficult to defend the innocence of a collective). The prophets had described the state of corruption and crime in the city before its destruction, they had warned of the coming catastrophe. There is no point in denying sin, and our lamenter is not choosing that road in his protest. Yes, the people have sinned, but the punishment was too harsh, the threats have materialized in too literal a form. Even worse, the harsh punishment didn't occur in a moment of anger and loss of control: it felt like it was meticulously planned and executed, it was too thorough, too comprehensive. As if someone had been waiting for the moment of sin, so that punishment could be unleashed like an ambush:

All around me He has built Misery and hardship; He has made me dwell in darkness, like those long dead. He has walled me in and I cannot break out; He has weight me down with chains. And when I cry and plead, He shuts out my prayer; He has walled in my ways with hewn blocks. He has made my paths a maze. He is a lurking bear to me, a lion in hiding. He has forced me off my way and mangled me. He has me numb. He has bent His bow and made me the target of His arrows. (Lamentations 3.5–12)

The image of God as lurking bear and hiding lion patiently waiting to attack his prey is one of the most shattering and striking images ever produced in biblical literature. It is a bitter testimony to the richness of the poetic power enlisted to express that bewildered protest encapsulated by the *eikhah*. Theodicy is thus not questioned by the claim of innocence but by the harshness of the executed punishment.

Repentance is another proper response to suffering known in the tradition. With the turning away from a previously sinful life, suffering is treated constructively; it is contained as an awakening experience. Repentance is especially proper when sin is admitted, because it makes devastation tolerable. The

author of Lamentations explores that traditional response as well. He initially calls for repentance: “Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord. Let us lift our heads with our hands to God in heaven” (Lamentations 3.40–41). But such a call is immediately undermined in the following verses: “We have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven. You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us. You have slain without pity” (Lamentations 3.42). And here comes the most striking of all the accusations against theodicy: “You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through” (Lamentations 3.43). Sin is not denied and innocence is not proclaimed: “We have transgressed and rebelled,” but as indicated by the words that follow, God cannot be justified as merely executing proper retribution – he should have forgiven the transgressions, but he was too harsh, calculating, and antagonistic: “(but) You have not forgiven.”

We might take some sort of comfort had the catastrophe been predicted ahead of time. This would have meant that the world is governed by a meaningful, predicted order, that it makes sense even if such destruction seems unbearable. It is even more significant that as part of the prophetic prediction a restoration was promised after a period of death and exile. In such a case not only is comprehension and meaning secured but hope is established. The book of Deuteronomy, which prophesizes the curses and afflictions that will befall the people of Israel, set the tone for such an attitude:

When all these things befall you – the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the Lord your God has banished you, and you return to the Lord your God, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, from there He will fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. (Deuteronomy 30.1–5)

The last verses of the book of Lamentations take aim at the supposedly comforting power of such a promised finale. Our author is referring to the verses in Deuteronomy as he reaches the end of his lamentations; and since these are the last verses and they conclude the book, special and careful attention must be given them:

But You, O Lord, are enthroned forever, Your throne endures through the ages. Why have you forgotten us utterly, forsaken us for all time. Takes us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back, renew our days as of old. For truly [*Ki im*], You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us. (Lamentations 5.19–22)

The dialogue with Deuteronomy is evident. God is called upon to fulfill his promise and to bring his people back to him. The use of the verb *shav* [return, restore] in both texts establishes the intimate relation between them. Ending the book with such a calling might have reflected a recovery through hope. Since the prophecy of devastation was fulfilled, it is time for fulfillment of restoration. The fact of destruction and its fulfillment might even bring credibility to the promise of return. And yet the last verse undermines that mode of meaningful containment as well. The JPS translation I have been using translates the last verse as beginning with the utterance “For truly” – “For truly [*Ki im*], You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us.” With such a translation, the verse might mean the following: bring us back, since you have already punished us rather harshly and it is enough. (I am not sure whether that is what that translator had in mind, but some commentators support such a reading.) This seems to be a wrong reading since the Hebrew words – *Ki im* – that begin the verse do not translate well as “For truly.” The proper understanding of these two words at the beginning of the last verse of Lamentations is of immense importance. These two very small words set the final tone of the book and provide a key to the very meaning of the stance of lamenting. The “*ki im*” at the end of Lamentations therefore has a weight equal to the word “*Eikhah*” that begins the book.

The biblical use of “*ki im*” might express two closely related meanings; yet each of them applied to this last verse sets a slightly different tone to the whole of Lamentations. The first meaning of “*ki im*” is “but.” A clear example of such usage appears in the verse in which God tells Jacob that his name from now on will be Israel: “You shall be called Jacob no more, but [*Ki im*] Israel shall be your name.” If the same reading is applied to the verse in Lamentations, the verses should be translated as follows:

Takes us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back, renew our days as of old.  
But, [*Ki im*] You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us.

The verse prior to “*ki im*” expresses the expectation of a return, which, as we saw, is founded on a firm biblical promise. In the last verse this expectation is shattered and undermined. The expectation was raised, *but* God has rejected us. The book concludes in a bewildered, protesting, bitter tone in which even the promise of a future reconciliation is shaken. God has rejected his people; there will be no return. It is indeed a harsh ending for the book, maintaining its overall posture of mistrust, born of a world that is devastated. It shatters as well the traditional frameworks that are supposed to help overcome devastation and set it within a meaningful order.

The second reading of “*ki im*” in biblical language suggests a softer, though still defiant, tone. “*Ki im*” could also mean “unless.” A clear example of such usage of “*ki im*” appears in the book of Amos, when the prophet declares that before executing his plans, God always shares them with the prophets: “The Lord God does nothing unless [*ki im*] He reveals his secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3.7). Here one would translate the last two verses of the Scroll of Lamentations:

Takes us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back, renew our days as of old.  
Unless [*Ki im*] You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us.

Unlike the first stronger possible meaning of *ki im* as “but,” here there is no assertion to suggest that God has rejected his people; rather, a doubt has been raised. “Bring us back to you *unless* you have rejected us.” The end of Lamentations in this reading undermines the firm hope for reconciliation with a skeptical, hesitant possibility that return might no longer be an option.

Both readings of “*ki im*” set a final tone that is devoid of comfort. Lament, which is a defiant bewildered protest, maintains its posture of solitude until the end. There is no catharsis and no consolation; the ability to predictably read the world is severely damaged. Trust in the known world – trust in a future promised reconciliation – is no longer there. In a brilliant poetic gesture, the declaration of mistrust is left to the end of Lamentations: its last verse opens with “*ki im*,” as if to block the expectation of a possible conciliatory end.

The Scroll of Lamentations is read in the synagogue every year on the ninth day of the month of Av. According to tradition, this is the day when the First and Second Temples were destroyed. The cantor recites the Scroll in a somber melancholic melody as the community, sitting on the floor, listens in silence. Yet the reading of the end of the Scroll departs from the text of its written version; here a bold rereading transforms the meaning and experience of Lamentations. When the cantor reaches the book’s penultimate verse, the whole community joins him in reciting loudly: “Takes us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back, renew our days as of old.” Then the cantor continues to the last verse, this time reading alone: “Unless / But, [*Ki im*] You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us.” The reading does not end there, even though this is the last written verse. The whole community repeats aloud the verse before the last one: “Takes us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back, renew our days as of old.” Only then does the reading end.

Thus the community concluded the reading of Lamentations not with the original last verse that bitterly undermines the hope of return, but rather in affirmation of that hope. This way of refashioning the end of Lamentations is a liturgical scandal, affirming a resolution of what had intentionally been left

unresolved. Though bold and scandalous, such a revision is understandable. The community, which receives Lamentations as part of its liturgical heritage, is searching for some resolution; it refuses to accept the ultimate rupture expressed in the lamenting stance. It is no wonder, then, that this dramatic shift at the end of the Scroll was already mentioned in rather early sources dating to the sixth, ninth, and eleventh centuries,<sup>2</sup> as if to say that the hope for reconciliation cannot entirely be overshadowed by bitter and bewildered protest.

And yet despite this rereading, it is meaningful that the Scroll has come to us as it stands. It represents a validation of a rare moment in religious life in which the order of reality is shattered in its totality, and the ways in which tradition has dealt with such a moment are questioned and undermined. The lamenter has made the case fully, and it is not censored – not even its bold metaphor of God as stalking animal, lurking patiently in hiding as he waits to attack his prey. Such a stance cannot be denied: it is even canonized in scripture, and has persevered within the long liturgical tradition of *kinot*. From the lamenter's point of view, the burden of proof has shifted to God and, as far as the lamenter is concerned, until proven otherwise, no reconciliation can be expected in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> For documentation of this liturgical practice, see Spiegel 1996.

Eli Schonfeld

# Ein Menachem: On Lament and Consolation

*Zion spreadeth forth her hands, and there is none to comfort her*  
– Lamentations 1.17 (King James Version)

Consolation is one of the fundamental longings of human existence. Man seeks consolation, as he seeks meaning, or love. While the question of love or of meaning has occupied philosophers intensively over the ages, the philosophical literature on consolation is very limited, and rare.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, not only was consolation left on the margins of the history of philosophy (in antiquity and the Middle Ages), consolation in modernity became the object of a form of rationalistic critique of religion. The consolations of religions, for the moderns, are considered to be imaginary, untrue, and harmful. This paper proposes a reflection on consolation that challenges this modern critique. In what follows I will try to be attentive to the existential desire for consolation, and will propose an original reflection on the philosophical question of evil and suffering from its point of view. What is consolation? Is it possible to formulate a non-naïve, philosophically valid wisdom of consolation? And what is the relation between consolation and lament? How does lament contribute to a different hearing of consolation? These are the questions I will address here.

## 1 The question of consolation

One of the theoretical pillars on which, at least since the seventeenth century, the philosophical critique of religion reposes is the dichotomy between reality and imagination. Spinoza distinguishes in his *Ethics* between real beings (or beings of reason [*entia rationis*]) and imaginary beings [*entia imaginationis*] (Spinoza 2000 [1677], 101). Whereas real beings have true concepts, discovered by means of clear and distinct reasoning, imaginary beings are the products of human imagination, provoked by the (bodily) emotions of fear and hope. Such imaginary beings, Spinoza claims in the introduction to his *Theologico-Political*

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<sup>1</sup> The inventory, as far as I have been able to reconstruct it, is quite short: it counts Seneca's trilogy on consolation (*De Consolatione ad Marciam*, *De Consolatione ad Polybium*, *De Consolatione ad Helviam*), Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, Boethius's classical *Consolation of Philosophy*, Jean Gerson's *The Consolation of Theology*, and Meister Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation*.

*Treatise*, are at the origin of superstition, prejudice, and religion (Spinoza 2007 [1670], 49–51). This Spinozistic order of discourse would easily identify the discourse of comfort with the regime of imagination: the longing for consolation results directly from our deepest hopes and fears. When one loses a loved one, when one fears an imminent danger, when one hopes for better days, one seeks a consoling word. When one suffers, when the body collapses, one seeks consolation. The discourse of consolation can be recognized as the discourse of imagination *par excellence*: it is the product of man's unstable existence, of his "fluctuating soul" [*fluctuatio animi*]. And insofar as the *logos* of consolation is a modality of religious discourse, its concepts, resulting from fear and hope, are false, imaginary concepts, which do not account for the "true reality."

The dichotomy imagination/reality operates exemplarily in two major nineteenth- and twentieth- century critiques of religion: namely, those derived from Marx and from Freud. Written in 1843, Marx's opening lines to "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's '*Philosophy of Right*'" link religion and consolation "naturally," recognizing their shared origin in illusion or imagination:

Religion is the general theory of this world [...] its general basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human being inasmuch as the *human being* possesses no true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly a struggle against *that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion [...] Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. (Marx and Engels 1964, 43–44)

Following the dichotomy of Spinoza, Marx posits on the one side religion and its "consoling aroma" as the "fantasmatic realization" of man, and on the other side "true reality." The simplicity of his account is a symptom of the self-evident character of his thesis: the difference between reality and imagination, and the identification of religion and consolation with imagination, goes without saying. Hence the popularity of the paragraph's closing sentence.

Nearly one hundred years later, in clinical language, Dr. Freud repeats the same scheme in his critique of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927):

Thus I must contradict you when you go on to argue that men are completely unable to do without the consolation of the religious illusion, that without it they could not bear the troubles of life and the cruelties of reality. That is true, certainly, of the men into whom you have instilled the sweet or bitter-sweet poison from childhood onwards. But what of the other men, who have been soberly brought up? Perhaps those who do not suffer from the neurosis will need no intoxicant to deaden it. (Freud 1968 [1927], 49)

Religion enables man to bear the cruelties of reality thanks to its consoling doctrines (afterlife, divine justice, its giving existence a sense of purpose). But there is a price to this: "true reality," as Freud puts it. Instead of being blinded

by phantasmagoric illusions, Freud, like Kant before him,<sup>2</sup> summons us to be adults, to leave our childhood behind, to silence the child in us: “Man cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life.’ We may call this ‘education to reality’” (Freud 1968 [1927], 49). The dichotomy reality-imagination, again, organizes Freud’s logic: on one side religion and its consoling virtues, and on the other side the suffering of existence, the encounter with the true and cruel reality.

“The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus 1961 [1942], 60). These are the words of Camus, describing the absurd man in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. A life without consolation: this is what philosophical modernity proposes to us. Despite the deep differences in the thought of each philosopher, from Spinoza to Camus the dichotomy between “true reality” (rational for Spinoza, materialistic for Marx, absurd for Camus) and “consoling illusion” (offered by religion) is maintained. I claim this dichotomy to be the unquestioned axiom of the modern critique of religion. This axiom implies at least two elements worth highlighting. 1) It supposes that the distinction between reality and imagination is unambiguous; it supposes that we possess a clear and unquestioned, clear and distinct, notion of what is “true reality.” 2) The axiom is judgmental. The value of each of the alternatives is always already presupposed and understood: whereas reality is positively connoted, imagination is negatively connoted. Hence the critique. I claim, furthermore, that we moderns have completely assimilated this axiom: it governs how we think, and we are unable to think otherwise. This axiom delineates our philosophical (positivistic, scientific) modernity. This is why the discourse of consolation, not to speak of the discourse of religious consolation, is always suspect in our eyes. We are incorrigible adults. We have indeed forsaken the child in us. We are dogmatically modern.

Is this modern evidence unsurpassable? Can the axiomatic identification of consolation and illusion be undone? If we question the scientific and positivistic idea of reality, perhaps a positive answer to this question can be suggested. Inspired by existential philosophy and phenomenology, I will try here to open a path in this direction. I will propose a phenomenological meditation on consolation and lament that challenges the fundamental axiom of the modern

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<sup>2</sup> See the opening lines of Kant’s “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (Kant 1991 [1784], 54–55).



critique of religion while trying to get closer to the existential meaning of consolation.

## 2 Theodicy and consolation

I will start my inquiry with Leibniz. Leibniz is perhaps the only philosopher in modernity who provided a philosophical discourse of consolation. In his work on Leibniz and the Stoics, Donald Rutherford remarks that among other things, Leibniz's *Theodicy* was meant to propose an alternative to Cicero's *De Consolatione*:

In comprehending the justice of God's action, we acquire our fullest knowledge of the unity of the divine perfections of power, knowledge and goodness, and this knowledge itself and our consequent love of God is, for Leibniz, the source of true happiness. The first of these benefits is the one most closely associated with the traditional idea of *consolatio*. In understanding the larger context in which God exercises his justice, we are aided in dealing with loss, grief, pain, and alienation – circumstances that reflect our limited power and vulnerability to fortune. (Rutherford 2001, 139)

Theodicy – the justification of God given a world full of evil – is one of the classical forms that the discourse of consolation adopts in religion, and, since Leibniz, in philosophy.<sup>3</sup> It stems from a rationalization of a basic religious conviction: there is no evil without cause, no evil without origin. And Leibniz's text on theodicy is a text on the question of the origin of evil. Yet his rationalization produces an alternative to the classical religious approach to the question of evil. Instead of looking at evil and suffering as punishments – no suffering without sin, says the Talmud in tractate *Shabbat* (55a) – Leibniz regards evil to be an integral part of being. Leibniz's thesis is well known: among the infinite possible worlds God could have created, our actual world is the best possible world. Relying on his metaphysical concepts (pre-established harmony, the principle of sufficient reason, the idea of individual substances [monads], God's goodness, his almightiness, etc.), Leibniz establishes in his *Essais de Theodicée* the *rationality of evil*: "It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like

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<sup>3</sup> This reasoning can already be found in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes 1931 [1641], 177–179), but it is Leibniz who systematically developed the idea, bringing it to full maturity in his 1710 *Essais de Theodicée* (full title: *Essais de Theodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*).

Utopian or Sevarambian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness” (Leibniz 2009 [1710], 129; bk. 1, § 10). Leibniz renders evil relative and necessary: relative because in order to estimate the badness of evil one should be able to compare this world to all other possible worlds; necessary because, seen from above, in the general sum of things and in comparison with other possible worlds, evil is necessary for the shaping of the best world we live in. Nevertheless, because as finite human beings our perspective on the world is limited, *we are unable to see this*, and thus we cannot truly account for evil. All we have is a theoretical understanding of the necessity of evil, and not a concrete understanding of it. We are *subjectively impressed* by the visibility and tangibility of evil, without being able to *calculate* its rational necessity: “I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together?” writes Leibniz (2009 [1710], 129; bk. 1, § 10). We think evil is terrible, it is a sign of the imperfection of the world, and therefore a sign of the imperfection of its creator, of its cause (God). But, as Leibniz writes, “if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world; which, with nothing omitted and all allowance made, was found the best by the Creator who chose it” (Leibniz 2009 [1710], 128–129; bk. 1, § 9).<sup>4</sup>

Leibniz, in his *Theodicy*, disregards the subjective *Erlebnis* of evil: he disregards concrete, bodily suffering. Reason is a cure for our human, all-too-human sufferings. The self as body plays no role in Leibniz’s economy of evil. Rutherford writes: “Leibniz’s theodicy does not pretend to console by speaking directly to our emotional suffering. Its point is best expressed in a remark Leibniz makes in the essay *On Destiny*: ‘with the eyes of the understanding we are able to occupy a point of view that the eyes of the body do not and cannot occupy’ (G VII 120/W 572). This change of point of view supplies the basis for what can be described as a ‘philosophical consolation’” (Rutherford 2001, 139). In Leibniz, philosophical consolation is possible provided one contemplates the world with purely theoretical eyes.

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4 Later in the text Leibniz’s claim will be that the visibility of evil is not a sign for its reality: “We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil. Often indeed two evils have made one great good: *Et si fata volunt, bina venena juvant*. Even so two liquids sometimes produce a solid, witness the spirit of wine and spirit of urine mixed by Van Helmont; or so do two cold and dark bodies produce a great fire, witness an acid solution and an aromatic oil combined by Herr Hoffmann. A general makes sometimes a fortunate mistake which brings about the winning of a great battle; and do they not sing on the eve of Easter, in the churches of the Roman rite: *O certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est! O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!*”

Leibniz links reason and consolation. In this respect, he differs from authors such as Spinoza, Marx, or Freud. While for them imagination and consolation are linked, Leibniz dissociates this bond and arrives at the opposite thesis: absolute knowledge (which can compare infinite worlds) consoles. Consolation for Leibniz is achieved when reality is seen for what it is, without illusions. Nevertheless, one should ask whether Leibniz's philosophical consolation can really procure consolation *for the human subject*. Indeed, if consolation depends on absolute knowledge, then, strictly speaking, God is the only one who can profit from such consolation, precisely because in Leibniz's metaphysics He is the only monad possessing absolute knowledge. Hence what one could call the paradox of Leibniz's philosophical consolation: God, who created the world by choosing the best possible one, and who by doing so determines the very existence and intensity of evil in the world he created, is the only one who can understand this choice – and thus he is the only one who can be consoled for the evil resulting from this very choice. Consolation becomes in Leibniz's theory a predicate of God, leaving man unconsoled.

Leibniz's *Theodicy*, from the perspective of the question of human consolation, results in an *aporia*: the only subject of consolation is also He who creates – or permits<sup>5</sup> – evil. This *aporia* is the symptom of a more fundamental problem in Leibniz's theory. Leibniz requires that we disregard the body and adopt the perspective of pure intellect. We should rely on “the eye of the understanding” alone, and not the “eyes of the body.” From the start, theodicy avoids looking into concrete evil, into the *phenomenon* of evil, i.e., suffering. It addresses the *idea* of evil (Leibniz's sole problem being the theoretical question of how to combine the goodness of God with the reality of evil), avoiding looking into the original givenness of evil, into human suffering as it is lived subjectively by man. Or stated more conceptually: Leibniz reduces quality (pain, suffering) to quantity, supposing that quality is quantifiable. This is precisely what Galilean science is about: an absolute measure for all that is, quan-

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5 To avoid the idea that God, who is absolutely good, is directly responsible of evil, Leibniz distinguishes between God “wanting” the good and “permitting” evil, writing in *Discourse on Metaphysics* (written in 1686 and published posthumously): “We must make a distinction [...] For if the action is good in itself, we can say that God wills it and sometimes commands it, even when it does not take place. But if the action is evil in itself and becomes good only by accident, because the course of things (particularly punishment and atonement) corrects its evilness and repays the ill evil interest in such a way that in the end there is more perfection in the whole sequence than if the evil had not occurred, then we must say that God permits this but does not will it, even though he concurs with it because of the laws of nature he has established and because he knows how to draw a greater good from it” (Leibniz 1989, 40).

tity – i.e., mathematics – being the key to understanding being.<sup>6</sup> It is exactly at this point that theodicy encounters a huge obstacle: suffering is not quantifiable. If one detaches evil from its subjective, qualitative root, one deforms the phenomenon itself. To adopt a theoretical attitude toward evil means to avoid looking at the phenomenon itself, to avoid *being in relation with* suffering – be it my suffering or the suffering of the other. Calculative reason, to cite Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception (2002 [1944], 88), necessarily fails to account for reality whenever it faces concrete suffering. Not because it lacks reasonable answers, but precisely because, looking at evil through the lenses of Reason, it does not recognize suffering. The problem is not our inability as finite beings to make God’s calculations, but the very idea that evil can be integrated into an equation. Suffering is invisible to calculating reason. This is why, often and very coherently, evil is considered by rational philosophers to be an illusion, a nonentity. Privation, as it is sometimes put. A phantasm: *entia imaginationis*. From the point of view of reason, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the category of evil does not apply to Being. But we are in the world. And *as such*, we long for consolation. Which philosophy cannot provide.

### 3 Consolation in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*

Is it possible to envisage consolation otherwise? Is it possible to formulate a thinking of consolation that does not disregard the *quality* of suffering? To address this question I propose to turn to Friedrich Nietzsche and to the theme of consolation in his early work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). In this book Nietzsche proposes a meditation on suffering, and tries to think tragedy as consolation. This Nietzschean meditation will help us transition from a theoretical to an existential discussion of consolation.

Consolation plays a central role in Nietzsche’s work on the origin of tragedy. The highest goal of tragedy is, according to Nietzsche, to procure “metaphysical consolation”: “In the older tragedy one could feel at the end the metaphysical consolation, without which it is impossible to imagine our taking pleasure in tragedy” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 107).<sup>7</sup> If for Aristotle the *telos* of tragedy is

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<sup>6</sup> This is one of Husserl’s insights in his account of the Galilean revolution, as analyzed in Husserl 1970, 37–42. See also Alexandre Koyré’s account of Galilean science, inspired by Husserl, in his *Galileo Studies* (Koyré 1978 [1939]).

<sup>7</sup> In his 1886 foreword to the book (“A Critical Backward Glance”), Nietzsche rectifies his terminology: instead of speaking of metaphysical consolation he proposes the notion of “ter-

a *katharsis* of the emotions of pity and fear, for Nietzsche the end of tragedy is consolation. To understand the nature of what Nietzsche calls metaphysical consolation, we should reconstruct Nietzsche's analysis of the birth of tragedy *from the point of view of the question of consolation*. The myth of Silenus in paragraph three of *The Birth of Tragedy* will be our starting point, as it is there that the primordial suffering of existence is described:

An old legend has it that King Midas hunted a long time in the woods for the wise Silenus, companion of Dionysos, without being able to catch him. When he had finally caught him the king asked him what he considered man's greatest good. The daemon remained sullen and uncommunicative until finally, forced by the king, he broke into a shrill laugh and spoke: "Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest boon not to hear? What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second is to die soon." (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 29)<sup>8</sup>

The myth of Silenus teaches the truth of existence: it would have been better for man not to have been born than to have been born. Nothing justifies human existence. No purpose, no final destination. Everything that is is pure contingency. This "terrible wisdom of Silenus" (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 33) unveils the most intimate suffering in human existence: being is absurd; man is doomed to live a meaningless life. This is his inevitable *fate*. Once he is born, he will never be able to undo the fact of his existence, the fact of his being. All he can do is pray for a quick end: to die soon. This is the starting point of Nietzsche's philosophy of existence.

The Dionysian principle, for Nietzsche, is a reaction to this initial suffering and a cure for it. The Dionysian *Erlebnis*, best illustrated by the state of drunkenness, is one in which the absurdity and meaninglessness of being are lived positively. This is how the ancient Greeks responded to the unbearable truth of Silenus: instead of wishing to die, they managed to recognize a deeper layer

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restrial consolation." From a phenomenological point of view, as we will see, those terms are perfectly exchangeable, and this rectification in no way affects Nietzsche's phenomenology of consolation, the *affect* of consolation being, precisely, both metaphysical and earthly.

<sup>8</sup> Silenus and the ancient tanaic rabbi Shamai agree: "Tov la-adam shelo nivra mishe nivra" ["it would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created"] (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Tractate Irrubin* 13b). The debate between the school of Shamai and the school of Hillel on this question lasted for two and a half years, Hillel defending the idea that it is good for man to have been created, Shamai claiming the opposite. The Talmud concludes with an *ethical* compromise: "They finally decided that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds or, as others say, let him examine his future actions."

in being, one that fills the subject with the impression that beyond contingency, beyond the futility of existence, there is some consistency in being. “Life,” says Nietzsche, is experienced here as “indestructibly joyful and powerful.” And this Dionysian experience is an experience of consolation:

The metaphysical consolation [*Der metaphysische Trost*] – with which, I wish to say at once, all true tragedy sends us away – that, despite every phenomenal change, life is at bottom indestructibly joyful and powerful, was expressed most concretely in the chorus of satyrs, nature beings who dwell behind all civilization and preserve their identity through every change of generations and historical movements. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 50; see also 53)

Anticipating the theme of *amor fati*,<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche describes here an existential *Erlebnis* where sorrow turns into joy, where the terrible truth of existence is lived positively. Despite the ever-changing nature of things, despite man’s finitude, the subject senses through the Dionysian experience a joy and a power underlying everything that is. Consolation consists in this access to the depths of being, made possible by Dionysian art. Later in the text Nietzsche again stresses this idea:

Dionysiac art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal delight of existence, but it insists that we look for this delight not in the phenomena but behind them. It makes us realize that everything that is generated must be prepared to face its painful dissolution. It forces us to gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision: a metaphysical consolation momentarily lifts us above the whirl of shifting phenomena. For a brief moment we become, ourselves, the primal Being, and we experience this insatiable hunger for existence. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 102)

“To gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision ...”: a new gaze, a new way of looking at being, this is what Nietzsche is describing in his phenomenology of the Dionysian. A vision that is not petrified by evil, but is capable of standing before suffering and *seeing it, experiencing it, otherwise*. The world of causes is not the world of Dionysus: the Dionysian effect procures no explanation; it does not point at the causes of evil, but, through an immediate experience of being, evil is lived joyfully.

Nietzsche’s analysis of tragedy does not stop here. The Dionysian state is only the first reaction to evil, a reaction that implies the erasure of the subject. Indeed, according to Nietzsche’s phenomenology, the Dionysian state is one in

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<sup>9</sup> In *Ecco Homo* he writes: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it — all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary — but *love it*” (Nietzsche 1969 [1888], 258).

which the subject, the individual self, is absorbed by being: “Dionysiac stirrings arise either through the influence of those narcotic portions of which all primitive races speak in their hymns, or through the powerful approach of spring, which penetrates with joy the whole frame of nature. So stirred, the individual forgets himself completely” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 22). The ancient Dionysian celebrations are described by Nietzsche as celebrations where the subject ecstatically merges into nature, where he abandons himself to a kind of mystical unity, and becomes one with “the primordial One” [*Das Ur-Eine*]: “He feels himself to be godlike and strides with the same elation and ecstasy as the gods he had seen in his dreams” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 24). Man is one with nature, one with the others, one with the gods. He is not himself anymore. He is outside of himself: *ec-stasis*. Whence Nietzsche’s latent question in *The Birth of Tragedy*: how can one experience metaphysical consolation without losing the subject? How can consolation be experienced by the subject himself, and not by some ecstatic I which, returning to reality after the moment of ecstasy, will inevitably be confronted again with the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence?<sup>10</sup>

For Nietzsche the Dionysian principle is at the origin of tragedy,<sup>11</sup> yet this principle does not suffice to account for the accomplished form of tragedy. Tragedy is not the expression of Dionysus alone, but is rather that of the merging of Dionysus and Apollo (the father of the plastic arts, the arts of representation, Dionysus being associated with music). While initially the Apollonian response to the Dionysian myth of Silenus was one of rejection and negation (resulting in an inversion of the wisdom of Silenus<sup>12</sup>), eventually Apollo and Dionysus were joined together, and from this reconciliation – “the most important event in the history of Greek ritual” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 26) – tragedy emerged: “Thus we have come to interpret Greek tragedy as a Dionysiac chorus which again and again discharges itself in Apollonian images [...] Tragedy is an Apollonian embodiment of Dionysiac insights and powers ...” (Nietzsche

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**10** Here is how Nietzsche describes this way back to reality: “As soon as that quotidian reality enters consciousness once more it is viewed with loathing [...] The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophelia’s fate and the wisdom of the wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 51–52).

**11** See § 7, where Nietzsche defends the thesis according to which “tragedy arose out of the tragic chorus and was, to begin with, nothing but chorus” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 47).

**12** “The Greeks were keenly aware of the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to be able to live at all they had to place before them the shining fantasy of the Olympians [...] Now it became possible to stand the wisdom of Silenus on its head and proclaim that it was the worst evil for man to die soon, and second worst for him to die at all” (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 30).

1956 [1872], 57). Accomplished tragedy consists in facing the unbearable truth of existence (the wisdom of Silenus, which the Apollonian, at first at least, negates) without quitting the *locus* of the subject. This is possible only when Apollo *represents* the Dionysian truth, when Dionysus dresses himself in the clothes of Apollo:

The Apollonian embodiments in which Dionysos assumes objective shape are very different from the continental interplay of shifting forces in the music of the chorus, from those powers deeply felt by the enthusiast, but which he is incapable of condensing unto a clear image. The adept no longer obscurely senses the approach of the god: the god now speaks to him from the proscenium with the clarity and firmness of epic, as an epic hero, almost in the language of Homer. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 58–59)

Instead of the obscure presence of the god, enthusiastically absorbing the subject and annihilating his self, tragedy is the place where the god *speaks* to the subject. This speech, if we can push Nietzsche's analysis a little bit further, is a *consoling speech*. This is the miracle of Tragedy: an (Apollonian) speech, whose (consoling) effect is Dionysian. Through tragedy (an event described here in terms of revelation: "the god now speaks to him"), the world regains sense. And this is exactly how Nietzsche, in the first paragraph of his text, understands the unique virtue of the Apollonian principle: as in dreams, the Apollonian representations are such that they *speak to us* and that through them, sense is made. Describing the Apollonian effect, Nietzsche writes: "Here we enjoy an immediate apprehension of form, all shapes speak to us directly [*alle Formen sprechen zu uns*], nothing seems indifferent or redundant" (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 30). The Apollonian event of meaning is an event of *saturated meaning*: everything speaks to us, every detail counts, even if we are unable to say exactly how or why. Meaning here is experienced in its immediacy, without the mediation of reason, as in dreams. Returning to the analysis of tragedy, we can thus say that tragedy is not a *theory* of suffering or of evil but the event where sorrow is turned into joy through the Apollonian representation of it, which *speaks directly to us*. This immediacy of meaning, without offering the experience of ecstasy from the one side and without discarding evil from the other side, is the original event of consolation for Nietzsche, one he finds in ancient Greek tragedy.

This phenomenology of consolation is so important to Nietzsche that when he depicts the fall of tragedy (and the simultaneous rise of philosophy) he emphasizes the difference between metaphysical-existential consolation and false, philosophical consolation. Opposing the Dionysian-musical art of tragedy of Sophocles and Aeschylus to the theoretical-Socratic tragedy of Euripides, Nietzsche shows that whereas Sophocles's and Aeschylus's tragedies produce



true existential consolation, Euripides, influenced by his *daemon* Socrates,<sup>13</sup> introduces a fake, theodiceic form of consolation (containing a principle of calculation, ideas of reward and punishment):

Yet the modish anti-Dionysiac spirit shows itself most clearly in the denouements of the new plays. In the older tragedy one could feel at the end the metaphysical consolation, without which it is impossible to imagine our taking pleasure in tragedy. Most purely, perhaps, in *Oedipus at Colonus* we hear those harmonious sounds of reconciliation from another world. But, once the genius of music has departed from tragedy, tragedy is dead, for what, henceforth, is to furnish that metaphysical solace? The new dramatists tried to resolve the tragic dissonance in terrestrial terms: after having sufficiently buffeted by fate, the hero was compensated in the end by a distinguished marriage and divine honors. He thus resembled a gladiator, who might perchance be set free after he had taken his beatings and was covered with wounds. The place of metaphysical solace was now taken by the *deus ex machina*. (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 107)

Dismantling the classical opposition between imagination and reality, Nietzsche is imposing here a new criterion for truth. The question is no longer the question of true reality versus imagination, but the question of the nature of consolation: *deus ex machina* or metaphysical comfort. The measure of truth, no longer mathematical, is now existential. Sophocles's tragedy is true because it procures genuine consolation, whereas Euripides's tragedy is false because it offers only a *simulacrum* of consolation. Euripides speaks the language of theory, of philosophy, whereas Sophocles's tragedy speaks the language of consolation. And this language of consolation is the language of lament: "the infliction of pain was experienced as joy while a sense of supreme triumph elicited cries of anguish from the heart. For now, in every exuberant joy there is heard an undertone of terror, or else a wistful lament over an irrecoverable loss" [*Aus der höchsten Freude tönt der Schrei des Entsetzens oder der sehnsuchtsvolle Klagelaut über einen unersetzlichen Verlust*] (Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 27). Nietzsche knows the central role lament occupies in tragedy.<sup>14</sup> Lament, *trenos* in Greek, comes from *trenomai*, to cry out loud at funerals. In lament, pain is verbalized, exteriorized, and this verbalization is the very place where sorrow is experienced differently. Nietzsche pushes this phenomenology to its extreme: "the infliction of pain was experienced as joy," he writes (1956 [1872],

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<sup>13</sup> According to Nietzsche's reconstruction of the beginnings of philosophy, Socrates whispered his degenerated philosophical wisdom into the ears of Euripides. Socrates, as Nietzsche depicts it in an ironic way, is the *daemon* of Euripides (see Nietzsche 1956 [1872], 76–78).

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, as part of his analysis of the essential elements of tragedy, offers in his *Poetics* a description of lament, *kommos*: "a *kommos* is a lament [*trenos*] shared between chorus and actors" (see Aristotle 1995, 69).

27). Again, pain is experienced positively, as joy. The core of Nietzsche's phenomenology of consolation (the inversion of sorrow into joy) is linked to lament, *Klagelaut*. Tragedy, through lament, procures a lived and unmediated consolation. The suffering subject is immediately relieved. He re-lives.

Like Spinoza, Marx, and Freud, Nietzsche understands the inconsolable nature of reality. But unlike them, the existential philosopher recognizes the central place of the longing for consolation in human existence. As such, this longing has to be addressed. Therefore both the concept of truth and the idea of consolation need to be revisited. And this is exactly what Nietzsche does in *The Birth of Tragedy*: he criticizes the Socratic-philosophical idea of truth and formulates an alternative to the theoretical consolations of philosophy. Ancient tragedy as understood by Nietzsche offers a new way of approaching the enigma of consolation. Consolation should address the very place of distress, of sorrow, of suffering. This is what tragedy does: it effects an inversion in the experience of pain itself. This immediate, non-intellectual inversion is what qualifies existential consolation as opposed to theoretical consolation. This form of consolation confronts rather than masks evil, and affects it in its very essence: suffering is *lived* differently (without being conceived differently, without being *justified*).

## 4 *Ein Menachem*: Lamentation, consolation

Of all the means of consolation there is none so efficacious for him who has need of it as the declaration that in his case no consolation can be given.  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*<sup>15</sup>

Equipped with this Nietzschean lesson I wish to turn in the final section of this study to the *book of Lamentations* [*Eikhah*] and analyze the relation between lament and consolation in its first chapter. My analysis will concentrate on two words, which appear five times in the opening chapter of Lamentations and can thus be recognized as the chapter's *leitmotiv*: *ein menachem*, "there is no consoler." In what follows I will try to listen to those two words and to render audible their very particular tonality.

First let us recall the verses themselves:

Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her [*ein la menachem*]. (1.2)

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15 Nietzsche 1911 [1881], 294; § 380.

Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future. Her fall was astounding; there was none to comfort her [*ein menachem la*]. “Look, O LORD, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed.” (1.9)

For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me [*ki rachak mimeni menachem*]: my children are desolate, because the enemy prevailed. (1.16)

Zion spreadeth forth her hands, and there is none to comfort her [*ein menachem li*]: the LORD hath commanded concerning Jacob, that his adversaries should be round about him: Jerusalem is as a menstruous woman among them. (1.17)

People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me [*ein menachem li*]. All my enemies have heard of my distress; they rejoice at what you have done. May you bring the day you have announced so they may become like me. (1.21)

The opening lines of *Lamentations* are striking: no consoler, says the poet. No redemption, no messianic end to suffering (one of the names of the Messiah, according to the sages of Israel – who deduce it from the first verses of *Lamentations*<sup>16</sup> – is Menachem, the consoler). Lamentation, so it seems, *excludes* consolation: the genuine expression of lamentation is *ein menachem*, there is no consoler. At first sight, lamentation begins with the casting out of consolation.

But perhaps this reading is right only at first sight. Inspired by Nietzsche’s analysis it could be possible to hear those verses otherwise. This other possibility is what I wish to explore here.

To hear those verses differently we should return to the phenomenology of lament and consolation we have met in Nietzsche, and elaborate it further. Lament, we have said, is the verbalization of suffering. Lament is the very expression, in language, through language, from within language, of suffering. It is the ex-expression of suffering. It occurs when wailing becomes speech: *threnodia* in Greek – a wailing [*threnos*] that becomes speech [*ode*]. And this speech, this very verbalization of pain – mysteriously – consoles. This is the initial proposition we have to look at more closely: expression functions as the medium for consolation, as the *locus* of consolation.

The idea of lament as a particular modality of expression is explored by Gershom Scholem in his essay “On Lament and Lamentation.” Lament, says Scholem, is “a language of silence”: “The expression of innermost expressionlessness, the language of silence is lament” (*Lament*, 316). Scholem does not state that lament is silence, but that lament is *the language* of silence. As if silence is not always silence, as if silence has a language of its own, as if language itself can be silent. This is the paradoxical nature of lament: it *says*

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<sup>16</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin* 98b.

*nothing* (positive); it is not a language of propositions. As such, lament exists on the edge of *nothingness*: it is a borderline phenomenon, between language – or revelation, as Scholem puts it – and silence. Better: lament is the very expression of this border: “This language expresses nothing, absolutely nothing positive, but only the pure border” (*Lament*, 314). Lament is expression and the negation of it, the “expression of innermost expressionlessness.” This moment in Scholem’s analysis is extremely insightful. It designates a linguistic region that is pure expression. Not expression *of* something, but simple and pure ex-pression. The language of lament, in this sense, not only exists on the border but demarcates the meaning itself of the borderline shared by every language: the dimension itself of expression that, as such, precedes speech and conditions language. The (non-)language of lament is a language prior to all languages, a language conditioning every language, it is the language of expression as such. Pure expression is what is left over after “each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence,” after language has “absorbed its own light” (*Lament*, 318). The formula of Scholem is dense and precise: “expression of innermost expressionlessness.” Following this intuition, one can push the analysis further: in its most primal and archaic form, lament is a pure and simple crying out loud: “Ah!” Lament is the absolute beginning of language: a single letter coming out from the deepest of one’s soul. Pure expression, lament invents or reinvents language. It reminds us of the essence of language.

What is the particular modality of expression in lament? *Threnodia*: a wailing that becomes speech. Like a baby’s cry, mysteriously becoming language. Like a child’s cry, on the edge of language. This cry is not expressionless but it is here that expression manifests itself in its purest form. Crying is not yet ordinary language or everyday language – not because nothing is said, but because too much is said. The cry is an excess of expression, it is a saturated expression, the expression of expression itself. A crying face: pure expression. Tears: a body that is overflowed by it(s)elf. A moment of saturation of meaning, yet to be deployed, yet to be made explicit. Lament is this wailing becoming speech, this bursting out of expression. In this sense, lament is the very passage from silence to speech. As Scholem notes, lament is a borderline phenomenon: a first language, a language before language, perhaps a prolegomenon for every possible language. The mouth opens, a sound is being heard, a word is ex-teriorized from the depths of one’s being: there is meaning. *Eikhah*.

From the depths of one’s being: lament is the innermost expression of the soul. It is the soul as expression. Ex-pression: I’m pressed to expose myself, to open up. Expression is the very movement of the opening of the soul to exteriority, *to transcendence*. In suffering, the subject is closed within himself. La-

ment is this very moment where an opening occurs.<sup>17</sup> In his phenomenology of suffering, Emmanuel Levinas describes this initial opening up of the soul, this initial expression, precisely as an initial lament: “Why do you make me suffer and not reserve for me, rather, an eternal happiness?” A first saying, a first question or first lamentation or first prayer” (Levinas 1998 [1978], 129). “How?” “Why?” “*Eikhah*?” A first question that is not a question but the initial verbalization of pain, the first moment of expression, or the very awakening of the soul. In lament, it is not reality that is expressed, but the singular self who speaks a speech that transcends ordinary speech, a speech that silences ordinary language. Reality is questioned in its entirety: a cry in the dark, waiting – perhaps eternally – for consolation.

Theodicy misinterprets this first expression, this first question: “Why?” The “why” of lament extends beyond the theoretical structure question-answer. It is a lament-question, which as such does not require an answer. What does it require? Consolation, precisely. This is the fundamental misunderstanding of theodicy: it does not hear the true sense of “Why?” It is deaf to *Eikhah*.<sup>18</sup>

Lament is not only a pure cry but is already speech: it inscribes itself in language. If indeed lament is a language of pure expression, this expression deploys itself *in* language. Not only is it expressed in a language, but, as Schollem says, lament catches the most intimate and intransmissible essence of each language: “Not to everybody, but only to the children of one’s own people can lament be passed down” (*Lament*, 317). It is important to recognize the true sense of the linguistic facticity of lament. Language is the element in which the questioning soul, the crying soul, expresses itself. Yet language as such is never mine. Even our mother tongue is not “ours.” Language constitutes a first sphere of exteriority, a first sphere of transcendence. Expression is not only this movement from the insight to the oversight but also a movement from the outside to the inside: the letting in of a dimension of transcendence, language. Lament is not only a primordial expression but also a primordial affection by

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<sup>17</sup> Here is where the phenomenology of lament and consolation meets the form of thinking Rosenzweig dubbed “new thinking.” “New Thinking” is an existential mode of thinking, attentive to moments of transcendence that condition the opening up of the subject to otherness. What Rosenzweig articulates in the second book of the second part of the *Star of Redemption* is precisely a phenomenology of love, which he presents as the very choreography of revelation, depicting the opening up of the subject to the call of the other (Rosenzweig 1971, 173–185). The phenomenology of lamentation that I propose here tries to grasp this choreography from another angle.

<sup>18</sup> I’m indebted to Prof. Moshe Halbertal, who developed the idea of *Eikhah* as a pure question, as a pure plaint that does not expect an answer, in his essay in this volume. For a linguistic analysis of the term *Eikhah*, see Yechiel Z. Moskowitz’s commentary on the first word of Lamentations, in *Daat Mikra on Eikhah* (Jerusalem 1973).

otherness. It is both expression in its purest form and language in its most factual dimension (otherness). Language, in lament, *takes over*: the self is guided by the depths of language, by a singular otherness suggested without being grasped, without being mastered. This letting in of otherness is a true revolution of the soul: it is, to use Rosenzweig's category, a first miracle.<sup>19</sup> According to this analysis, contrary to Scholem's phenomenology, lament is not opposed to revelation but is already a moment of revelation. Through language, lament is already a primordial relation of man to otherness. The first encounter of God with Adam-the-First, the first dialogical revelation of Transcendence to Man is spelled exactly like the first word of *Lamentations: Ayeka* [Where art thou] / *Eikhah* [How; אֵיכָה] (Genesis 3.9).<sup>20</sup>

We are now ready to formulate the thesis that will allow us to tie together lament and consolation. Consolation is not about saying the right words ("consoling speech"), it is not about explaining evil, but rather it is about the very opening – or re-opening – of the dimension of otherness. Consolation is about making the pure event of otherness *present*, thus opening the very dimension of *future*, of hope. Levinas, in a penetrating passage, suggests this intuition while providing a phenomenology of the caress.

The caress of a consoler which softly comes into our pain does not promise the end of suffering, does not announce any compensation, and in its very contact, is not concerned with what is to come afterwards in the economy of time; it concerns the very instant of physical pain, which is then no longer condemned to itself, is transported "elsewhere" by the movement of the caress, and is freed from the vice-grip of "oneself," it finds "fresh air," a dimension and a future. (Levinas 1988 [1947], 91)

The caress "concerns the very instant of physical pain," writes Levinas. It is neither a distraction nor a compensation but the redemption, in pain, of the moment of pain itself. Alterity – the contact of the other – has this miraculous effect. The question is not what causes this effect (this would transpose us out of phenomenology, out of the discourse of meaning), but what the very sense of the consoling effect is. Otherness, proximity, consoles because consolation consists in the opening up of the dimension of otherness. *Lament, like caress, is already a first contact with otherness*. Lament is always already, even though

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<sup>19</sup> See especially Rosenzweig 1971 [1930], 108–111. For Rosenzweig, the passage from silence to language is the very passage from a mysterious, mythical, and closed realm to the dialogical and open world of revelation.

<sup>20</sup> The classical rabbinical commentary on Lamentations (*Eikhah Rabbah*) explicitly links the verse in Genesis 3.9 and the first word of Lamentations: the word *Eikhah* in Genesis 3.9 should be understood as God's lament after the transgression of His commandment by Adam-the-first (see *Eikhah Rabbah*, 4th petichtah).

mostly *via negativa*, an attestation of otherness (in language [language as otherness], but also through language [language as address, as solicitation]). Lament is a language of proximity, it is proximity made language. As such, in its raw materiality, through the facticity of language, lament consoles.

We can now address the question of the *content* of the language of lament in the *book of Lamentations*. The only true content of lament is one that negates the very idea that lament is about content. Therefore, the only original lamentation is the one who negates consolation as a theme: “*ein Menachem la*,” “*ein la Menachem*.” There is no one to comfort her, no positive word of consolation. If it is true that consolation is not about compensation or calculation (as in theodicy); if it is true, as Nietzsche teaches, that consolation is to be found not in myths about afterlife but in facing suffering truly while experiencing it otherwise (as in tragedy), then the *book of Lamentations* offers one of the most radical possibilities of consolation. Facing evil directly, formulating its irreducible nature, means, for the author of *Lamentations*: negating the consoler, *ein menachem*. Yet this very act is a new form of consolation. The lack of a consoler is indeed the *content* of lament – but at the same time, verbalizing evil at its extreme, lament produces a consolation of a higher degree: the verbalization of evil is already a making present of otherness.<sup>21</sup> This is the *aporia* of consolation. Authentic consolation is susceptible to emerge only at the moment when the inconsolable nature of evil is being verbalized. The *book of Lamentations* activates this *aporia*: consolation can be suggested only through its absence, through its negation.

By verbalizing suffering a new form of consolation emerges. Indeed, the poet does not say “no consolation,” but “no consoler”: as if negating the presence of a consoler does not mean negating consolation.<sup>22</sup> It suggests another form of consolation: this consolation inscribed in the very act of lament, this consolation made possible by the very existence of lament as a modality of the soul. *Ein menachem* awakens this radical, on the edge of atheistic, effect of consolation. *Ein menachem*: the only truthful ex-pression, the only words – or anti-words – capable of consoling.

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<sup>21</sup> The very fact of facing evil and exteriorizing it by proclaiming its pure and irreducible nature has a consoling effect. This is not a causal or psychological explanation of consolation (verbalization as therapy, or as a technology of relief), but an attempt to describe the phenomenon of consolation, to hear its meaning. The relation between consolation and ex-pression in language is what interests me here, a relation that can also take written form, in literature for instance. Literature, in Kafka, or Blanchot, can be understood as one of the possible modalities of consolation. For a first-person testimony on this subject, see Stig Dagerman’s powerful meditation in Dagerman 1989.

<sup>22</sup> I’m thankful to Dr. Ilit Ferber for having drawn my attention to this crucial distinction.

Everything depends on hearing the tonality of these words. I have tried to reconstitute the original music of those two words: *ein menachem*. This tonality is present *immediately* in the recitation of *Lamentations* during the Jewish liturgy of the ninth of the month Av (the day commemorating the sufferings of the people of Israel throughout history). This tonality, like a caress, consoles. A consolation irreducible to any critique of religion as illusion. A consolation that, affecting the soul immediately, preserves its mystery intact.

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## Section Two: **Lament and Gender**



Galit Hasan-Rokem

# **Bodies Performing in Ruins: The Lamenting Mother in Ancient Hebrew Texts**

Laments have been part of human expressive culture since earliest antiquity, found in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts, as well as in literary documents such as Homer's *Iliad*, the book of Lamentations, and other texts in the Hebrew Bible. Laments are also part of most traditional oral literary systems. Without claiming universality for this genre or any other genre, cultural differences notwithstanding, the genre of laments shows remarkable similarities in content and style across linguistic and cultural boundaries as well as significant stability in the *longue durée*.<sup>1</sup>

## **1 Death, language, and the body**

It is the study of laments perhaps more than of any other genre that has stimulated the study of classical Greek sources illuminated by ethnographical, folkloristic, and anthropological research, and especially the study of oral performance in the work of Margaret Alexiou (1974) and in particular in the feminist scholarship of Nicole Loraux (2002),<sup>2</sup> much inspired by Jean-Pierre Vernant (e.g., 1989). It is thus somewhat surprising that the study of the Biblical book of Lamentations has not generated similar studies, and especially that there has been almost no research relating to its descriptions of bodily performance of lament singing.<sup>3</sup>

Ilana Pardes has masterfully outlined the intriguing and colorful transformations of the Song of Songs as a “cultural text” from the scrutiny of Enlight-

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1 I dedicate this text to Na'ama Rokem and Ariel Rokem with love, gratitude, and appreciation.

2 See also Holst-Wahrhaft 1992, 2000.

3 Maier (2008), who applies the semiotic concept of body as sign, comes close to moving from the suffering body to the performing body, though without making reference to actual expressions in the text: “The personified city responds to the experience of destruction by using her body, her voice, to lament ... The wailing body of Jerusalem represents the space of survivors living in the ruins, trying to cope with the loss” (2008, 152).

enment scholars to contemporary Israeli cultural performances both elite and popular, showing its power as a major generative force in the production of art and meaning (Pardes 2013).<sup>4</sup> Historically the book of Lamentations certainly holds a central place in Jewish ritual: it has for generations been read – in some customs even more than once – during the 9<sup>th</sup> of the month Av [*Tisha B'Av*], the annual day of commemoration of the destruction of both temples in Jerusalem, the first by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the second in 70 CE by the Romans. In a number of Christian denominations it is included in various formats of the *Tenebrae* (“shadows”) service performed on the days before Easter, commemorating the Crucifixion. And yet the cultural transformations of Lamentations and the history of its research do not reveal anything like the vibrancy and liveliness of the Song of Songs, which spreads its splendor of Eros and nature across wide and various semiotic systems.<sup>5</sup> Its sublime and well-crafted poetry notwithstanding, the pain and sorrow of Lamentations did not suffice to introduce it into the heart of the discourse on poetics. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a central figure of the German Enlightenment as well as of Romanticism, and a forerunner of modern folklore studies, devoted an entire book, *Lieder der Liebe* (*Songs of Love*), to the Song of Songs (Herder 1827 [1778]) but did not devote many lines to Lamentations in his elaborate essay “Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie” (“On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry,” [Herder 1993 (1782–1783), 663–1308]).<sup>6</sup> Lamentations totally lacks the healthy, pastoral *milieu* animating Song of Songs that communicated the (Romantic) wholesomeness of the past, which enabled Herder to envision a return of the Jews of Europe to the soil from which the vines and figs sprouted in the Song, so different from the ruins of Lamentations. It is among the ruins that Lamentations must be read, the ruins in which human bodies survive and lament.<sup>7</sup>

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4 A different perspective: Brenner 2000. For an exegesis informed by folk literary and performative approaches, see Zakovitch 1992.

5 The theme of the representation of the destruction of Jerusalem in the visual arts is even more beyond my expertise than most of the other topics that I address in this article. I thank Richie I. Cohen for wisely guiding me and the other members of the “Exegetical Imagination” group (see below) through some examples, especially the monumental painting of Wilhelm von Kaulbach, *Titus Destroying Jerusalem* (1846, Neue Pinakothek, Munich) and *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* by Rembrandt (1630, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). See also Ronen 1998.

6 English translation: Herder 1971 [1833]. But see also the English author whom Herder quotes in the first sentence of that essay: Robert Lowth, from his Lecture XXII, “On Elegiac Poetry” (Lowth 1815).

7 With regard to Pardes’s fine analysis of the enchanted embrace of Song of Songs by Zionist culture, the different reception of Lamentations may be understood as a too-harsh reminder

The earliest ethnographically informed comprehensive study of the book of Lamentations was Hedwig Jahnow's (1879–1944, in Theresienstadt) *Das hebräische Leichenlied im Rahmen der Völkerdichtung* (*The Hebrew Dirge in the Framework of Folk Poetry* [Jahnow 1923]),<sup>8</sup> later drawn on by Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), who had established the comparative study of genre within the school of form-critical research of the Hebrew Bible in his work on Lamentations (Hiller 1992, 32; see also Berges 2002, 45). Jahnow's work was based on earlier studies of Middle Eastern folk customs and oral literature collected mainly in Palestine by pioneering scholars in the field such as Gustaf Dalman (1855–1941). Jahnow's comparative method echoed contemporary Central and North European folklore studies and drew inspiration from Sir James Frazer's "Myth and Ritual" school. Although she describes various concrete instances of folk life – burial customs, folk medicine – there is no reference whatsoever to the corporeal performance of laments in her analysis. When she mentions such gestures as shaking the head and teeth grinding she considers them to be apotropaic, warding off evil forces, rather than expressive, and not necessarily connected to the lamenting at all (Jahnow 1923, 187).<sup>9</sup> Combining the field work experience of Vered Madar, who has studied Yemeni Jewish women's lamenting in Israel (Madar 2005a, Madar 2005b, Madar 2011),<sup>10</sup> and my own reading of the bodily aspects of narrative performance in ancient Hebrew texts (Hasan-Rokem 2005), I review here the Biblical book of Lamentations focusing on bodily expressions associated with lamenting that appear in the text. Madar's work beautifully shows how the lamenters turn their bodies into versatile and expressive tools, and how their poetic language focuses on the body, both as the object of pain and longing and as the instrument of their artistic performance. My reading of this ancient Hebrew text will thus complement the disembodied conceptualization of Lament/*Klage* as a historically saturated characteristic of

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of the past that was instead integrated with much idealization through texts that had not circulated in traditional Jewish culture, such as Josephus's account of the "heroic" events of Massada. See Zerubavel 1995.

**8** Jahnow is guided by an almost Grimmian historical view of the genre – devolution until its destruction (Jahnow 1923, 55–56, 265), partly motivated by the emergence of Christianity, which she links to the belief in resurrection.

**9** I should also note here Hilma Granqvist (1890–1972), a Swedish-speaking Finnish anthropologist working in the Holy Land, who published her first volumes on marriage and birth in 1931 and 1935, respectively. Her work on death and burial rituals was published as late as 1965.

**10** Inspired by fieldwork collecting folk narratives, folk songs, and proverbs among Jews from Yemen in Jerusalem in the nineteen-thirties and forties, Goitein (1957) proposed a daring theory about women as creators of the poetic genres of the Hebrew Bible.

language per se,<sup>11</sup> or as an expression of philosophical or emotional modes.<sup>12</sup> I shall emphasize the phenomenology of laments as language in bodies, and not less as the language on bodies.

That brings us directly to the heart of the matter: the inseparable linkage between laments and motherhood. Laments are above all about separation and the severing of ties between mothers and their children, or other relationships often configured as ties between mothers and their children. It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that it is exactly the harsh contrast between the intuitive, wished-for inseparability of the mother-child relationship and the finality of the separation caused by death that constitutes the bleeding heart, the burning epicenter of laments. And thus, in an inverse move, lament proves to be all about life (cf. Dobbs-Allsopp 2002, 2).

It is this subverted longing for life presented when death has dominion that may account for the subversive tone associated with female lamenting, perhaps a desperate, ultimate expression of the continued resistance to the series of separations that motherhood imposes on the female body and psyche. The separation of the body of the child in its death or of the parent in her death is a link in a series of separations beginning when the fetus becomes a recognizably separate being moving inside the mother's body, causing evident changes in her size and physical sensations; continuing with the often painful,

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**11** I refer here to the various discussions by Gershom Scholem that were the focus of the symposium at the University of Antwerp, 6–8 February 2013, organized by Vivian Liska and Paula Schwebel. This essay is based on my lecture at the symposium, and I thank the organizers and the editors for all help and encouragement extended.

It was written under the inspiration and advice of the members of the “Exegetical Imagination” group of the Scholion Center for Inter-Disciplinary Research in Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2008–2011). In addition to the editors and the reviewers, special thanks for reading the manuscript at various stages of its development to Ruth HaCohen, Vered Madar, Ilana Pardes, Richard A. Rosengarten, Hagar Salamon, Dina Stein, Nili Wazana and Haim Weiss; as well as to Matthijs den Dulk and Lital Belinko-Sabah. See Scholem's *Klage* and his translations of laments in Job (*Tb2*, 544–547), Ezekiel (*Tb2*, 548–550), and from a medieval source (*Tb2*, 607–611), all translated into English in the present volume.

**12** See Ilit Ferber's beautiful recapitulation of Walter Benjamin's reflection on all language “as being essentially intertwined with loss”; as she writes: “Deeply saturated with melancholy and loss, language thus functions both as an expression of loss and as a site for its recuperation” (Ferber 2013, 120). My work obviously differs from the approach to language as unspoken potentiality that she subsequently discusses, as it does from most of Benjamin's disembodied and almost dehumanized use of the term “lament,” which Ferber discusses in depth (Ferber 2013, 141–151). Her only concrete reference to the cultural context of lamenting (215n35) briefly generalizes with no concern for historical and contextual variation, as has been given in a richly documented study, Rubin 1997.

dangerous, and even deadly tearing apart of bodies in birth, after which the distance keeps growing.

The other, implanted in a woman's womb, grows inside her, develops an independent pulse, and is violently separated from her in the act of labor, in which the other, born from the unity that was the pregnant body, first articulates its own voice. The series of separations continues: the baby is able to lie on its own; the toddler learns to walk, to go away and to return, and the older the child becomes the more powerful grows its capacity as well as wish to separate. Death is a separation unlike all others because of its finality, but it is also an intensification of the potential of total separation inherent in all the earlier stages, a more accentuated form of the natural sequence. The sense of finality pushes the language of laments backwards, to the ideal inseparable phase that indeed barely existed in totality and was lost, piecemeal, during life. Lamenting the parting from this life thus repeats the parting of bodies in birth.<sup>13</sup>

The lamenter expresses an ambiguous feeling: the refusal to allow total separation coexists with the necessity to separate as an expression of the surviving individual's desire to live. It may be difficult to think this, and it is difficult to say, but the lament as a song and as an artistic performance – and this is also true for written laments – is also an affirmation, not to say a celebration of the continuing life of the lamenter's body, and at the same time a recognition of her body's transience, thus also confirming the comfort to be found in the transience of the pain of separation.<sup>14</sup> The insoluble narcissism in the most sacred sense of the word, the narcissism of the erotic-thanatic entanglement of every stage of the mother-child relationship, infuses its aporetic energy into the language of laments. The lamenting words indeed signal beyond themselves, beyond that limit, which is not only the border between the living and the dead but also the limit of verbal reference – according to some also the uttermost boundary of our very existence (Suter 2008, 5–6). The notion on the limits of language may recall Scholem's youthful writings on the language of lament as being a borderline, a limit, *Grenze*: “Grenze ... zwischen ... des Offenbarten und des Verschwiegenen” – “the border ... between ... the revealed and the silenced” (*Klage*, 128; see also Ferber 2013, 151). Scholem sug-

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<sup>13</sup> The proximity of laments and songs of birth has been illuminated by Vered Madar in her study (2011) of Jewish women lamenters from Yemen who have immigrated to Israel.

<sup>14</sup> Such complexities are particularly strongly expressed in discussions of Lamentations emphasizing the post-Holocaust perspective of the reading implying the problematic of survivorship: Mintz 1996 (1982), Linafelt 2000. Both authors also emphasize the death and suffering of children in the text of Lamentations as a major topic.



gests this to be a unique trait of the lament as part of his conceptualization of the genre as a privileged discourse in Jewish culture.<sup>15</sup> That claim invites some doubt, and merits some negotiation, especially with regard to the ethnographic grounding of the genre, and all the more in light of what was said above regarding the near universality, diachronically and synchronically, of the genre of laments. It is to laments as words that refer to the world as experienced in the human body and expressed by the body that most of my ensuing discussion will be dedicated.

This particular hermeneutical and semiotic perspective on laments focuses on the encoding of the talking and singing body in concrete traces in the texts. Those traces are expressed either in specific mentions of the gestures of the lamenting body visible to the lamenters' (past, or imagined) audiences, or as subjectively experienced bodily sensations associated with the act of lamenting by the lamenters themselves. This perspective gives rise to questions that focus on the expressive and mimetic aspects of the performance of laments. How do laments convey the pain of loss? Does the lamenter express her own (less often his own) pain, or is she lending her body to others, as it were, to express their pain? Is she telling about pain or is she rather showing it? Or, if we consider her to be doing both, as is often the case, by which means does she tell and by which does she show? What other sensations in addition to pain are involved? How does all this relate to the subject, the first person, performing the lament?

The cultural and especially the religious contexts of the relevant ancient Hebrew texts raise some specific questions with regard to the representation of the body, such as the conundrum of the idea of the divine body in a culture where its representation is explicitly taboo,<sup>16</sup> in addition to the complexity of conceptualizing or articulating the suffering and dying human body and its annihilation by someone who has not yet experienced that but is bound to undergo the experience.

Questions pertaining to the representation of the body in language, and especially to the representation of the body's function as an expressive medium, are necessarily linked – it seems to me – to questions about subjectivity. Who is the lamenting subject, and in what position is she or he lamenting?

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**15** On the shared traditions with ancient Near Eastern laments, more below; however, see Alexiou 2002 [1974], 131–160, for the common Hebrew, Greek and Christian tradition; for Hebrew, esp. 172, 188.

**16** Cf. for instance Howard Eilberg-Schwarz, "Introduction," and "The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," pp. 1–16, 17–46. In *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, (Albany: SUNY, 1992). Originally published as "People of the Body: The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book." In *Journal for the History of Sexuality* 2:1 (1991), 1–24.

Studies of ancient texts (e.g., Bakhtin 1981, 1984, 1986; Ricoeur 1974, 1995; Svenbro 1993; Weinbaum 2001; Hasan-Rokem 2005; Kolesch 2006) have developed versatile hermeneutics for interpreting experience in its vocal and gestural articulations from written documents, to overcome the obvious discontinuity between the experienced world of the past and the experiential basis of the interpreter in the present time.<sup>17</sup> The interpretation must proceed as a series of attentive acts of watching and listening directed toward performers moving on the inwardly projected ruins of the past. Although her work addresses modernity and its wake, Svetlana Boym's thoughtful piece (2008) on the cultural work of ruins reminds us that both Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin have endowed us with the powerful presence of ruins in our hermeneutic arenas, to read what was, what became, and what did not.

Ruins are signs of destruction, but like a body after death they also tell us about what existed before the destruction. The cultural richness of this sign is so great and the work already carried out on it so important that it is not possible to give it the attention needed in the context of this already lengthy essay.

In the most significant ancient Hebrew text of lamentation, the Biblical book of Lamentations, the themes of bodily performance of laments, motherhood, and ruins are powerfully orchestrated, as I will attempt to demonstrate in a close reading of the text. This reading will further highlight the subversive character of lamenting and the relationship between this subversive character and the female perspective. Consequently, a reading of an elaboration from late antiquity on the book of Lamentations – *Lamentations Rabbah* – will connect the Hebrew tradition back to some of its probable ancient Near Eastern roots in its daring articulation of lamenting in relationship to divinity, male and female, in the Rabbinic text.

## 2 Reading Lamentations

It is to the ancient texts that we now turn, primarily to offer a close reading of passages from the biblical book of Lamentations, by common opinion attributed to a poet or poets in Judah reflecting on the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The anonymity of the author – contra the traditional view among Jews and Christians alike that it was composed by the prophet Jeremiah – leaves

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to mention Joan Scott (and others) who have blazed the trail for discussing experience as a historical category: e.g., Scott 1991, Jay 2005. For the book of Lamentations, see Wilkins 2010, 7.

open for interpretation the question of authorial position and subjectivity (Greenstein 2010; see also Dobbs-Allsopp 2002, 4–5; Wilkins 2010, 5, 14n10). Conveniently for the present discussion, *Lamentations* demonstrates a rather methodical division into chapters according to the subjectivity of the lamenters, with at least partly consistent consequential variations in the bodily expression of lamenting in each case. The various “voices” in the book have stimulated interpretation of a number of interesting role divisions, based on the essential multivocality of the text and on the deeply dialogic mode of communication including humans and the divine.<sup>18</sup> The female roles vary, from widow to bereaved mother to virgin.<sup>19</sup>

איכה יושבה בְּדָד הָעִיר רַבָּתִי עִם הָיְתָה כְּאַלְמָנָה  
רַבָּתִי בְּגוֹיִם  
עֲרָתִי בְּמַדִּינוֹת  
הָיְתָה לְמָס: (איכה א, א)

How lonely sits the city  
That was full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
Who was great among the nations!  
The princess among the provinces  
Has become a slave! (*Lamentations* 1.1; New King James Version)<sup>20</sup>

In chapter one the major lamenting subject is the female-personified city, connecting the text to Mesopotamian traditions of city laments;<sup>21</sup> her embodied

**18** E.g., Lanahan (1974) identified five personae that speak in the book: (1) the city of Jerusalem (as a woman; 1.9c, 11c–22; 2.20–22); (2) an objective reporter (1.1–11b [excepting 9c], 15, 17; 2.1–19); (3) a first person male sufferer (“soldier;” ch. 3); (4) the burghers (ch. 4); and (5) the choral voices of Jerusalem (ch. 5). Heim (1999, 129–169) goes into great detail in his analysis of the various voices, but without giving attention to bodily performance; O’Connor (2008, 28) mentions the many voices as well as the metaphor of voice, and observes two voices in each chapter, except for the last that has only one. Lee (2008, 34–35) suggests the presence of a female prophet’s voice in Jeremiah as well as in *Lamentations*.

**19** This aspect is discussed by most interpreters of *Lamentations*, see, e.g., Berlin 2002, 7–12, and Dobbs-Allsopp 2002, esp. 49–55.

**20** My preference for this translation is based on a strictly poetical instinct, no confessional considerations are involved, and where I find it deficient in precision or otherwise lacking, I incorporate changes from elsewhere or simply introduce my own change.

**21** Greenstein 2010, 72, 74–75 and references there; Greenstein discusses the long tradition from the Sumerian city laments to the Biblical occurrences of the genre but does not seem to consider the possibility that oral traditions were part of a communication system whereby they were transmitted around the ancient Near East. See in particular Noah 1983, esp. 69–75; Dobbs-Allsopp 1993, 32–38, 75–90 (and in its wake, e.g., Petter 2011). Biddle (1991, 180) mentions the appearance of the *Tyche* figures in Hellenistic cities as a possible later development of the protective figure.

expressions appear in eight verses of the chapter. The opening verse introduces a woman's mourning body posture characterized by the phrase "lonely sits," and the nouns pertaining to her status are justifying mourning if not directly calling for it. "Like a widow" and "has become a slave" indicate an associated body position partly left to the imagination: perhaps bowed down? It is, however, the loneliness, the utter separation from all and everything, that overshadows the text from here onwards and marks it with the utter solitude of the death of each individual. A single voice, a specific speech-act, enunciates the lament, reminding us that ultimately collective memory is constructed by numerous individual speech-acts. Like Nicole Loraux in her interpretation of the performance of laments in tragedies, I tend to emphasize the individuality of the lamenting enunciation and its contribution to the strength of societies and cultures through its emphasis on conflict rather than the functionalist aspect of social unity seen by others as the ultimate purpose of lamenting (Loraux 2002, 82–90).<sup>22</sup>

The lament expresses the undeniable loneliness of the subject confirmed by the fact that in death all attachments are undone, all ties untied, even the most intimate ones, even the closest. Some contemporary Jewish funeral ceremonies address the deceased in clear, crisp words: we proclaim you hereby free from any former attachment to any social bond or any organization, etc.<sup>23</sup> Male undertakers represent the organized social formation's leave-taking from the individual's body as a participant in associations and networks.<sup>24</sup> The female lamenter addresses the individuality of the physical frame; the body that

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<sup>22</sup> Importantly, Loraux points out that the collective identity brought forth by laments is above all the all-human, being mortal. Mintz (1996, esp. 23) also emphasizes the utter separation of the lamenter. On the expression "alone sits" and its parallels in Jeremiah 15.17, Lamentations 3.28, and Leviticus 13.46, see Smith 1990, 12, with elaboration on 13–14 on the paradox of the prophet's social seclusion because of his being close to God and the continuous pain he suffers that is caused by God.

<sup>23</sup> Having heard the formula numerous times at funerals in Jerusalem, I set out to find a textual source with the help of some of the foremost experts on Jewish liturgy, but to no avail. Resorting now to fieldwork methods I also found out that this may be one of those peculiarities termed *minhag Yerushalaim* by which the city's Jews have marked its special status in their lives – and deaths. The latter is emphasized by the preferred burial at the Mount of Olives because of the belief that it will have a special advantage at the resurrection of the dead, and such Diaspora customs as putting a small sack of Jerusalem earth under the head in the grave of the deceased.

<sup>24</sup> On the differences between male and female mourning expressions, see the basic dichotomy that Alexiou (2002 [1974]) observed in classical Greek culture between the lament [*threnos*] and the eulogy [*epitaphios logos*]. On the eulogies of learned male individuals in Talmudic culture: see Rubin (1997, 210) on professional male eulogizers; Mandel 2005 extensively reviews the contribution of learned males to eulogizing in various historical and geographical

once separated and was individuated from a woman's body, irrespective of its gender throughout life. If she was a woman the cyclical tale of body producing body is possibly reiterated in her. In parallel with the separation of the deceased from life, the lamenter separates herself from the rest of her society.

How lonely sits the city  
That was full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
Who was great among the nations!  
The princess among the provinces  
Has become a slave! (Lamentations 1.1; New King James Version)

The opening *Eikhah* [How], repeated in the second chapter's opening, reminds us of Scholem's astute observation regarding the recurrent rhyme "*-ayikh*" in Yehuda Ha-Levi's Zion poem,<sup>25</sup> a device repeated in Rabbi Meir from Rothenburg's *Sha'ali serufa ba-esh*, lamenting the burning of the Talmud, as he also notes.<sup>26</sup> The *-ayikh* rhyme interestingly parallels the "*aiai*" pointed out by Loraux (2002, 36–41) in the ancient Greek laments, and also echoes the opening word *eikhah*. In addition, *eikhah* emphasizes the role of questioning as a central mode of laments and mourning, which explains the prevalence of riddles with regard to lamenting, a topic that I have discussed at length in earlier work (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 39–87, 191–201).

In verse 2 bodily expression is even more explicitly associated with lamenting: "She weeps bitterly in the night, / Her tears are on her cheeks." The nocturnal scene aggravates her loneliness; the only body parts visible in the dark seem to be her face, her cheeks, fragments of her body, reminding us of the body's decomposition in death.

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contexts in Talmudic culture. For gender differences in mourning rituals in a different context, see Das 1996, 81.

25 "ציון הלא תשאליו" Scholem (*Klage* 133) correlates the two poems, although he does not mention that both poems rhyme "*-ayikh*."

26 "שאליו שרופה באש" See Scholem, *Tb2*, 607, translated in the present volume: "The original, which belongs to the group of laments known as the Zionide, and which exhibits the hard joining [*harte Fügung*] of the Northern-French/German *piyut*, has the continuous suffix-rhyme scheme characteristic of all the laments in this group: *ayikh*. The translation forgoes this characteristic rhyme-scheme on principle, since its essence in the Zionide is based throughout on the aural relationship between the aforementioned suffix-rhyme and the original canonical lament sound, *eikhah* ('how'), a relationship for which no parallel *can* be given in German." Scholem's translation and commentary were originally published under the title "Ein Mittelalterliches Klagelied," in *Der Jude* 4–6, (1919–1920): 283–86; I thank Paula Schwebel for that exact reference and her translation here. Cf. HaCohen 2011, 149, on the effect in the reception of the same phonetic element in a German Jewish context.

The representation of the female lamenter personified as a city varies at its next appearance at 1.16, to what in later texts becomes an almost iconic expression, the female city as a tearful lamenter, expressed in the first person: “For these things I weep; / My eye, my eye overflows with water.” In a strong expression of the versatility of the subject positions in the text, the third-person voice reappears at 1.17, now spelling out the name of Zion and, in a characteristic gesture of lamenting, adding her hands to her face: “Zion spreads out her hands.” But the translation of the strong, indeed internal, bodily expression of the Hebrew at 1.20

מֵעֵי תִמְרָמְרוּ נִהְפֹךְ לִבִּי בְקֶרְבִּי

is almost but not quite retained in the King James Version –

My bowels are troubled; mine heart is turned within me

– which clearly refers to the mourning womb. The inward movement from the body’s surface signals a close-up perspective becoming totally identical with the lamenting subject’s point of view.

The final two verses of chapter one each mention the bodily, vocal expression accompanying lamenting that has figured prominently in the language of the chapter – namely sighing. The vocal performance exerts a double effect: it connects the inner and outer parts of the body and links the individual to the community: “They have heard that I sigh” (1.21) and “For my sighs are many, / And my heart is faint” (1.22) The striking closure of the chapter’s last verse redirects the gaze to the innermost organ identified in biblical language with feelings, the heart (see, e.g., Smith 1998, 427–436). The oscillation between the individual and the collective, the iconic female city and the concrete individual lamenting woman, ultimately leans toward the individual voice, articulated by a woman inhabiting a body in which resides a heart, feeling a faintness on which the voice reflects.

There is a clear change in the subject position from the first chapter to the second. Throughout chapter 2 the bodily expressions of the lamenting stance are associated with the third-person description of the iconic female-personified city, occurring in eight verses in this chapter; in none of them is she the enunciating subject. In three of the chapter’s verses – 10, 11, and 12 – a shift from one subject to another occurs; the concrete physical expressions in all three portray a wide range of conventional gestures associated with lamenting:

The elders of the daughter of Zion  
Sit on the ground and keep silence;  
They throw dust on their heads  
And gird themselves with sackcloth.  
The virgins of Jerusalem  
Bow their heads to the ground. (2.10)

My eyes fail with tears,  
 My heart is troubled;  
 My bile is poured on the ground  
 Because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,  
 Because the children and the infants  
 Faint in the streets of the city. (2.11)

They say to their mothers,  
 “Where is grain and wine?”  
 As they swoon like the wounded  
 In the streets of the city,  
 As their life is poured out  
 In their mothers’ bosom. (2.12)

The figures acting and speaking in these three verses, the elders of Jerusalem, Jerusalem’s virgins, and the city’s children – that is, the disempowered remnants of a once-bustling city – are all recurring figures in the book of Lamentations, and their status as lamenters is blurred with their victimhood,<sup>27</sup> which also extends to the poet, whoever she or he is, and consequently to a readership that identifies with the experience. The mimicry and gesticulations in the passage (sitting on the ground, throwing dust onto the head, wearing sackcloth) are all distinctive mourning practices strongly correlated to lamenting, as are the bowing of the head and the shedding of tears.<sup>28</sup>

The Hebrew original of the final phrase of this cluster of verses, “their life is poured out /In their mothers’ bosom” – בְּהִשָּׁתַּפֵּךְ נַפְשָׁם אֶל חֵיק אִמָּתָם – is strongly associated with vocal performance. This association is borne out by the idiom’s parallel occurrence in the prayer of Hannah the mother of Samuel, which also further illuminates the essentialness of mother-child intimacy for the genre of laments (cf. Hillers 1992, 101): “But Hannah answered and said, ‘No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD’” (1 Samuel 1.15).

Verses 18–19 quote the words of the adversaries of Zion in a description of the personified city as a lamenting woman:<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dobbs-Allsopp 2002, 59, on the children in particular.

<sup>28</sup> Olyan 2004 barely mentions lamenting; the same is true about a much earlier work: Bender 1894–1895.

<sup>29</sup> Greenstein (2010, 73) draws special attention to these two verses in his discussion of the female identity of lamenters in the book of Lamentations.

Their heart cried out to the Lord,  
 “O wall of the daughter of Zion,  
 Let tears run down like a river day and night;  
 Give yourself no relief;  
 Give your eyes no rest. (2.18)

Arise, cry out in the night,  
 At the beginning of the watches;  
 Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord.  
 Lift your hands toward Him  
 For the life of your young children,  
 Who faint from hunger at the head of every street[.]” (2.19).

The sequence of the two verses 2.18–19 is the most elaborate and detailed description of lamenting practices in the book of Lamentations: the running tears, the eyes with no rest, the outpouring of the heart – an idiom that echoes 2.12 – and the lifting of arms toward heaven in part prayer, part lament.<sup>30</sup> The interweaving of tropes based on actual mourning rites in Biblical poetry of lamentation is prevalent (Greenstein 2010, 71<sup>31</sup>), and their particular, indeed peculiar distribution in the book of Lamentations is tightly connected with my main line of investigation, namely the expression of bodily performances of mourning in the text of the poetry of Lamentations. Again, here the rhetorical power of the passage rests unambiguously on the city’s motherhood; she is the mother of the victims of the catastrophe.<sup>32</sup>

The descriptions of chapter 2 show the bodily expressions of lamenting as seen and heard by observers – both sympathetic and unsympathetic – whereas in chapter 1 the lamenter tells of her own bodily sensations. The emphasis on motherhood as part of the persona of the lamenting woman appears in chapter 1 and is further intensified in chapter 2. Notably, the number of verses in chapter 3 exposing lamenting practices equals that of the two first chapters – chapter 1, containing its strong first-person enunciation of the personified female

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. “Mourning Rites” in Greenstein 2010, 70, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Greenstein states (77) that the Judeans’ sin is understated in the book and altogether absent in chapters 2 and 4; and he characterizes God’s wrath as excessive (78). He makes a reference (79) to *Lamentations Rabbah* proem 24’s reference to psalm 137; he prefers (79) the term “complaint” (an expression of protest and an appeal for relief from distress) to characterize the fifth chapter of Lamentations, considering only the four first chapters to be laments; he invokes the argument (80) that the lament is more cathartic than reflective, the complaint more calculated.

<sup>32</sup> Most scholars assume Lamentations to be the songs of those who remained in the city after its destruction. I wonder: could these perhaps be the songs of the exiles mentioned in Psalm 137?



city, and chapter 2, where the female city is related to in the third person – but the total number of verses is three times that of the two first chapters, so that the eight verses exhibiting bodily manners of lamenting in chapter 3 take up a smaller proportion of the chapter, and are mostly not concrete.<sup>33</sup>

Another great change in chapter 3 is the shift in speaking subject to that of a male mourner, apparently an inhabitant of the stricken city, traditionally seen as the prophet Jeremiah in Jewish as well as Christian sources, based on the 2 Chronicles verse about Jeremiah's lament for Josiah that was sung by male and female singers: "Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah. And to this day all the singing men and the singing women speak of Josiah in their lamentations. They made it a custom in Israel; and indeed they are written in the Laments" (2 Chronicles 35.25). The traditional attribution of these laments to Jeremiah was repeated by Josephus in the *Antiquities*<sup>34</sup> and was taken for granted by later generations of Jews as well as Christians. Yet the professed anonymity of the chapter allows for a more general identification with suffering than does such a specific attribution.

The only clear-cut scene of lamenting in chapter 3 appears in verses 48–49: "My eyes overflow with rivers of water / For the destruction of the daughter of my people" (3.48). "My eyes flow and do not cease, / Without interruption [...]" (3.49). The diminishing of the performative gestures and positions of lamenting in the third chapter, enunciated in a male first-person voice, already begins to signal where such semiotic elements do not belong; moreover, there are none in chapter 4, being a third-person description of the tragic events animated by theodicy, justifying God's acts and accepting the destruction of the city and the related human suffering as a balanced punishment for the sins of its inhabitants. There are also no bodily expressions associated with

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<sup>33</sup> Musicologist Ruth HaCohen has pointed out to me that the verses in chapter 3 are in general shorter than those in chapters 1 and 2 and thus the proportion is somewhat less dramatic; her count found 377 words each in chapters one and two (which I find a dramatic finding in itself regarding the compositional technique of the book) and 436 in chapter 3. Dobbs-Allsopp (2002, 49) also draws attention to the fact that the two first chapters exhibit the highest proportion of enjambed lines within the couplet.

<sup>34</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 10.78: "Great mourning was made for him by all the people who bewailed and lamented him for days. Likewise the prophet Hieremias [Jeremiah] composed a funereal dirge for him, which endures down to this day" (trans. Begg and Spilsbury 2005, 231). Greek: πένθος δ' ἐπ' αὐτῷ μέγα τοῦ λαοῦ παντὸς ἤχθη πολλαῖς ἡμέραις ὀδυρομένου καὶ κατηφούντος Ἱερεμίας δὲ ὁ προφήτης ἐπικήδειον αὐτοῦ συνέταξε μέλος [θρηνητικόν] ὃ καὶ μέχρι νῦν διαμένει (Greek text from Niese 1885–1895). Note that the 2 Chronicles verse mentions both male and female singers: וְהַשִּׁירָיוֹת וְהַשִּׁירָיִם. Cf. the same terminology in Ecclesiastes 2.8, with an apparently contrary meaning.

performing laments in chapter 5, the final collective prayer of utter prostration “HASHIVENU” – “Return us!” – begging God to take the city and its inhabitants into His fold and to reestablish the covenant.

Gestures of lamenting are thus emphatically correlated with first-person subjectivity (chapters 1 and 3), with feminine identity (chapters 1 and 2), and most of all with a resistant female subject, rather than a justifying male narrator-poet. However, the combination of first-person subjectivity and femininity (chapter 1) does not produce a higher intensity of such correlation than the use of a third-person speaker in the text (chapter 2). Thus the femininity of lamenting, on the basis of this small corpus, is the dominant trait that elicits bodily performative modes of expression in language. Admittedly the corpus is not large, but the conclusion drawn here is confirmed by its highly privileged and sacred status and to an even greater extent by its proven impact on later texts and practices.

### 3 Lamenting gender

By articulating lamentation as an act not of acquiescence or submission but rather one of independence and even resistance in front of the Almighty, the book of Lamentations, its literary framework notwithstanding, displays a tendency similar to many laments recorded in oral performances all over the world. It is of course important to mention the obvious, that loss is not experienced solely by women, nor do men exclusively set the norms. But in the cultural mirror of the poetry of loss, in many societies, the subversion of hierarchies as expressed in laments has been attributed to women; and this blatant tendency of resistance in the genre may indeed be one of the explanations for the clear gender division rendering laments a universally female genre.

The unequivocal gendering of the genre has merited more than one explanation. Among them: women embody the cyclical course of human life from conception through birth and nursing and on through fertility, post-fertility, and death, and are thus best equipped to express the cultural articulations of that cycle in its entirety (Holst-Wahrhaft 1992, 47);<sup>35</sup> or, by some measure-for-measure logic, since women are “entitled” to give birth they also “get” to handle the dead and lament them. These symbolical interpretations may, however, be bolstered or even replaced by an interpretation rooted in the social mecha-

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<sup>35</sup> A particularly interesting fieldwork-based study in this vein is Caraveli-Chaves 1980, giving some attention to the bodily performance.

nism of lamenting as a subversive activity. As Nicole Loraux has demonstrated with regard to laments in classical Athens and Vered Madar among Yemeni Jews, lamenting is a strictly restrained and policed activity, and representatives of the male hegemonic order have, in these and many other cases, instituted firm regulations about where, when, and for how long laments may be performed, and especially where and when they will *not* be tolerated.<sup>36</sup>

Lamenting involves, as we have seen, challenging the divine force or forces, and men cautiously seem to prefer not to take the risk – unless they are select, exceptional, indeed almost marginal individuals, such as prophets, who frequently do challenge God. As lamenters, women are placed in a zone of risk somewhat akin to the situation of the Pythian oracle at Delphi, placed between the known and the unknown, or the Woman of En-Dor, with her special talent to tread the borderlands between the dead and the living and to summon a dead spirit even under the cultural conditions of the Hebrew Bible, which usually does not express belief in an afterworld whence such spirits could be summoned.<sup>37</sup>

It is here that my discussion again traverses the young Scholem's insistence on the *Klage* as a discursive mode inhabiting the border, the *Grenze*. Women are assigned to scout the borderlands of the known and the unknown, life and death.<sup>38</sup> While the lament thematically relates to the body's transformation from being to nonbeing, the lament itself, like any oral utterance, undergoes in its moment of enunciation a transformation from nonbeing to being as well as from being to nonbeing. It embodies both knowledge and the death of knowledge. Scholem's almost total disregard of the gender aspect of the book of Lamentations is understandable as part of his methodical denial, indeed rejection, of the performative, embedded, and contextual elements of the

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**36** A classical example is Plutarch's account of Solon's legislation to restrict Athenian women's laments and death rituals (*Life of Solon* 21.5), confirming the perceived disruptive power of lament in antiquity. See Loraux 2002, 57; Suter 2008, 5–6; Perkell (2008, 93) emphasizes the subversion associated with women's lamenting and proposes that they convey an alternative ideological message to the heroic code of the epics (107). Philo of Alexandria, too, expresses in a number of his writings criticism about lamenting, male and female alike, that is too loud. The subversive disposition of the Biblical book of Lamentations itself is the focus of Mandolfo 2007. In an entirely different context, and taking a more conciliatory tone, Briggs (1992, 356) writes: "In particular, wailing women *are accorded the right* to reflect critically on what the shamans and other male leaders have said and done" (my emphasis).

**37** Seremetakis (1991) emphasizes the connection between the practices of divination and lamenting in the *longue durée* of the Greek lamenting traditions up to modernity. See also Goitein 1957, 264.

**38** Seremetakis (1991) returns to this theme many times in her fine book.

texts that he studied. Moshe Idel (1990, e.g., xix, xxii, xxv) has shown how this led Scholem to privilege and overemphasize the categories of myth and especially mysticism and to reject the performative aspect of magic in the complex of Jewish cosmology, especially among Kabbalists and Hassidism.

Having underscored the gendered side of laments, I am obliged to address the fact that the two most famous and most beautiful personal laments in the Hebrew Bible are recited by a great male poet: King David. But indeed, when we examine those two sublime texts, as well as some other Biblical male laments, their treatment of gesture and performance tends to confirm the correlation in poetry between female gender and bodily acts of mourning that was observed in the book of Lamentations. David's poetically nearly unsurpassed lament of Jonathan and Saul (2 Samuel 1.19–27) lacks any reference to performance or body activity. His laconic, arresting, and completely personal lament of Absalom – “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 19.1; Vulgate 18.33) – is repeated after a few verses: “But the king covered his face, and the king cried out with a loud voice, “O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 19.5; Vulgate 19.4). David's performance actually reminds us of the Yemeni Jewish women's hiding their faces, beautifully interpreted by Vered Madar elsewhere in this volume as producing the acousmatic voice, a voice that one hears without seeing an originating cause, which thus enables multiple transformations of the subject position between the worlds of the dead and the living. The acousmatic nature of the uttered voice thus echoes David's explicit wish to change places with his son. But, unlike gestures in the passages that I have referred to in the book of Lamentations, this gesture is clearly part of the narrative prose rather than of the poetic lament that, indeed, in both of David's laments, lacks references to the lamenting body.<sup>39</sup> Joseph's lamenting his father Jacob, on the other hand, is all gesture, no text: “Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him, and kissed him” (Genesis 50.1).

David's “If only I had died instead of you ... my son” is probably the emotionally most adequate expression of parental bereavement in any literature, written or oral. Its stark focus on the self, however, marks a difference from the conundrum at the heart of most women's laments – always collective, even when personal, and perhaps aware of the need to remain where they can care for other offspring; and always somewhat resistant not only to the loss of the primary love object but to the loss of life created in their bodies, in general.

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39 Weitzman (1995) adequately emphasizes the narrative context of David's lament.

## 4 Lamenting goddess

At the heart of the ancient Babylonian city laments, the poetics of which may have been incorporated into the Biblical book of Lamentations, were weeping gods and especially goddesses who lamented their destroyed cities and temples.<sup>40</sup> The goddesses in particular may have inspired the positing of a pivotal woman figure, Jerusalem, widowed, bereaved, and lamenting, who occupies the emotional center of large parts of the book, especially the opening chapters. As we have seen, the two topics that have been the special concern of this essay, bodily performance traces in the poetry of lamentation and the female gendering of lamenting, have been strongly correlated to the poetic legacy of the ancient Babylonian laments. These topics do not disappear from the later Jewish elaborations of the Biblical book of Lamentations.<sup>41</sup>

The most important midrashic compilation on the book of Lamentations is *Lamentations Rabbah* [*Eikhah Rabbati*].<sup>42</sup> In addition to the inter-culturally recognizable common traits of the genre mentioned above, there are similarities that are primarily grounded in the *Lamentations Rabbah*'s systematic and sequential reference to the chapters of the Biblical Lamentations. The midrashic voice seeks, as does the biblical, a dialogue with the divine. The attempted communication connects the human voice of the – then – “present” with the ancient voice of the revealed text. This occurs in the Rabbinic text, unlike its Biblical precursor, predominantly in prose, as the text of *Lamentations Rabbah*

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**40** Bible scholar and historian of the ancient Near East Nili Wazana has encouraged me to look for parallels in the texts that have survived from the Canaanite city state of Ugarit, and indeed even a preliminary look points at interesting points of departure for future research; see e.g., Coogan and Smith (2012, 30; 53; 73; 88; 126; on 90 “women’s laments” is a generic term; however, the laments mentioned are from gods and persons of both sexes; on 143–44 there is an actual lament text). See also Smith and Pitard 2009, 305–313, on Baal’s lament in CAT 1.3 IV.

**41** The scope of this paper does not allow for consideration of the numerous tales and discussions on mourning and laments in the vast corpus of Rabbinic literature and will only – partly – address the direct “offspring” of the book of Lamentations, *Lamentations Rabbah*. Fond memories of tracing ancient Mesopotamian traditions in the texts of the Rabbis with Stefan Maul in the spring of 2005 at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin resonate here. For his studies on laments, see for instance Maul 2005.

**42** Mandel 2006, 23n18: “Midrash Lamentations Rabbati is known in two textual versions: that of the *textus receptus* of the regular printed editions (deriving from the texts of the first printed editions, Midrash to the Five Megillot, Constantinople 1514 [?] and Pesaro [?] 1519), and a manuscript version printed by Solomon Buber, Midrash Echah Rabbati (Vilna, 1899). The two versions, while reflecting the same work, vary significantly, neither of them presenting a flawless text.”

lacks almost totally – with one blatant exception that I shall soon return to – poetic laments. Even prose descriptions of lamenting activity are few, but some are truly illuminating.

Among the thirty-six proems [*petihtaot*], apparently composed later than the main body of the book with reference to the first verse,<sup>43</sup> “How lonely sits the city,” a parable in proem number 2b provides a concise comment on the gendering of laments: a king who had two sons became enraged at each of them. Based on relevant scriptural verses the parable refers, respectively, to the exile of the ten tribes – the first son – and to the exile of Judah and Benjamin – the second son (Stern 1994, 160; 164–5; 252). Having thrashed the first son to death, the king mourns for him, but when he similarly kills the second son he says, “No longer have I the strength to lament over them, so call for the lamenting women to lament over them,” quoting Jeremiah 9.17: “Consider and call for the mourning women, / That they may come; / And send for skillful wailing women, / That they may come.” The Jeremiah chapter quoted continues with an even more explicit gendering of the genre, including a reference to the transmission of women’s oral tradition of laments and lamenting: “Yet hear the word of the LORD, O women, / And let your ear receive the word of His mouth; / Teach your daughters wailing, / And everyone her neighbor a lamentation.” (Jeremiah 9.20) (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 110–114).

This passage clearly pictures the transformational relationship between parental violence – and perhaps violence in general – and the performance of laments.<sup>44</sup> The father lacks the energy to lament the deaths of his sons – by his own hand – consumed as he is by his own violent acts. This is where the transformative power of the female gender steps in: the transformable and transforming body of the woman, once life-giving, is also able to carry the weight of the cultural production of mourning, lamenting with her voice and her body. The parable allegorically stages a particularly powerful instance of an image recurring in *Lamentations Rabbah*, namely that of the mourning and weeping God (Roberts 1992; Bak 1990).

In another short tale staged as a real event rather than as an allegory, the relationship between male harshness and female weeping is depicted in almost quotidian terms: the verse “She weeps bitterly in the night” (*Lamentations* 1.2) is taken up with a story that provides a harsh picture of the gender issue on the level of social relations, the male figure being also an influential leader: “There was a woman in Rabban Gamliel’s neighborhood; she had a young son who died and she was weeping over him at the night, and Rabban Gamliel

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<sup>43</sup> Mandel 2000 does not discuss the proems at all.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the destructive father figures in Sumerian city laments, in Kramer 1983, 73–74.

heard her voice, and was reminded of the destruction of the temple, and wept with her until his eyelashes fell off. When his disciples found out they removed her from his neighborhood.”<sup>45</sup>

There are, however, in *Lamentations Rabbah* a number of descriptions of male figures who are benevolent, even weak, and whose lamenting is effective (cf. Hasan-Rokem 2000, 143–144.). Exposing the revengeful and raging God of Lamentations and the majestic God of the chapter quoted from Jeremiah as being too weak even for lamenting paradoxically balances and disarms the anger of the female laments by presenting a powerless, even effeminate divinity. It is thus not surprising that in *Lamentations Rabbah* we find the apparently earliest inkling – and perhaps more than that – of a feminine personification of the Shekhinah.<sup>46</sup> In Rabbinic literature in general the term “Shekhinah” denotes an abstraction of God’s presence, but in proem 25 of *Lamentations Rabbah* she is a personified aspect of God who weeps, laments upon leaving her abode in the Temple of Jerusalem, and while the parable following the description indeed mentions a king as is the rule in the royal parables of the Rabbis referring to God, the text as whole may echo a gender-inclusive image of Divinity:<sup>47</sup>

Ten journeys made the Shekhinah, from cherub to cherub, and from cherub to the threshold of the House, from the threshold of the House to the cherubs, and from the cherubs to the ancient gate, from the ancient gate to the courtyard, from the courtyard to the roof, from the roof to the altar, from the altar to the wall, from the wall to the city, from the city to the Mount of Olives.<sup>48</sup> From cherub to cherub as it is written: “Then the glory [kavod] of the LORD went up from the cherub, and paused over the threshold of the temple” (Ezekiel 10.4); from cherub to the threshold of the House as it is written: “Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the thresh-

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<sup>45</sup> Translation of the text in Buber’s edition (1893, 61). Another version in Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 104b.

<sup>46</sup> Scholem 1991 [1976]. Scholem introduces the text as follows: “Among those texts that can be fairly and incontestably established, that which goes furthest, is the description in *Lamentations Rabbah*” (150); see also Marx 2013, 126–127.

<sup>47</sup> The pairing, indeed merging of king and Shekhinah reemerges in later stages of the feminine Divine element’s development (Scholem 1991 [1976], 165). See also *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, ch. 13.11 (Mandelbaum 1962, 234–235), see also Buber 1868, 229–230. Braude and Kapstein (1975, 261–262) translate “Shekhinah” as Presence. Religion and literature scholar Richard A. Rosengarten has suggested that even in the Biblical text there may be a connection between the gender-inclusive perception of the Divinity and of the Divine King, which may provide another insight on David’s laments discussed above.

<sup>48</sup> The compelling link to the Passion of Christ, beginning at the same point, which has been pointed out to me by Ruth HaCohen, and is especially relevant because of the then-future “history” of the Shekhinah figure in close neighborly relations with Marian motifs, must remain beyond the scope of this paper. I hope to develop it together with her in the future.

old of the Temple (literally House)” (Ezekiel 10.3); ... “had gone” is not what Scripture should have said but “had come,” but You said “had gone,” what is “had gone”? Said Rabbi Aha: “Like a king who had gone from his palace in anger, when he had gone he returned and fondled and kissed the walls of the palace and the pillars of the palace and cried and said: ‘Stay in peace my palace house, stay in peace my royal house, stay in peace my dear house, stay in peace from now on, stay in peace.’<sup>49</sup> So also, when the Shekhinah had gone from the Temple, she returned and fondled and kissed the walls of the Temple and the pillars of the Temple and cried and said:<sup>50</sup> ‘Stay in peace my Temple, stay in peace my royal house, stay in peace my dear house, stay in peace my Temple, stay in peace.’” – Said Rabbi Jonathan: “The Shekhinah spent three and a half years on the Mount of Olives thinking that Israel would repent and they did not and a heavenly voice [*bat qol*] announced and said: “Return, O backsliding children,” says the LORD; [“for I am married to you”] (Jeremiah 3.14, partly repeated in 3.22).<sup>51</sup>

Closely associated with this weeping “Ur-Shekhinah” or “Pre-Shekhinah,” whose performative acts of weeping while fondling and kissing the object of love blatantly emphasize the erotic-thanatonic thrust of lamenting, is the most beloved of matriarchs – Rachel – weeping for the exiles from her grave since ancient times: “Thus says the LORD: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, / Lamentation and bitter weeping, / Rachel weeping for her children, / Refusing to be comforted for her children, / Because they are no more’” (Jeremiah 31.15). Rachel possibly gained the position of favorite lamenter for all her offspring for generations, not only because Jacob preferred her but also because she herself became the object of lamenting due to her premature death during childbirth. In the *Lamentations Rabbah* passage employing this particular verse from Jeremiah, in proem 24, preceding proem 25 where the weeping Shekhinah departs from the Temple, Rachel is explicitly portrayed as the partner of God in the act of redemption. It is necessary here to follow the entire movement of proem 24 dedicated to the weeping God and his parallel female figure, Rachel, and to the weeping patriarchs, especially because of its stark descriptions of lament performances. Moreover, the only actual lament poem of *Lamentations Rabbah* appears in this text.<sup>52</sup>

49 Cf. Kramer 1983, 72, in his discussion of the “Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur”: “The poet says about each of these suffering goddesses – that they cry bitterly ‘Oh my destroyed city! Oh my destroyed house!’”

50 Cf. the kissing of the pillars of the house in a Greek lament, Alexiou 2002 [1974], 121.

51 The movements of Shekhinah in the space of Jerusalem remind us of the fluidity of the name “Zion” as the name for the mountain on which the Temple is built (Moriah), then the city and all of the Holy Land, which also lends the poet of *Lamentations* as well as *Lamentations Rabbah* much freedom in the characterization of the female figures symbolizing all of the above; cf. Dobbs-Allsopp 2002, 53.

52 Scholem (1991, 145) mentions the weeping Rachel as a privileged instance in the history of the formation of the later, fully personified Shekhinah; however, he does not include the Ra-



As a concrete representation of a passive or unable God reflecting on the verse, “He has drawn back His right hand / from before the enemy” (Lamentations 2.3b), in proem 24 of *Lamentations Rabbah* God first insists that he Himself weep over Israel, telling the angel Metatron:<sup>53</sup> “Woe is me. What have I done ... If you won’t let me weep I shall recede to a place where you have no authority to enter, and weep, as it is said ‘My soul will weep in secret for your pride’” (Jeremiah 13.17).<sup>54</sup> The text then employs a parental idiom that echoes both the angry father of the parable and the weeping mother: “Woe is me for my abode, my sons where are you? My lovers, where are you?” There follows a detailed description of the gestures of a mourning human father in comparison with – almost as a model for – God: “He weeps, pulls his hair, slaps his face, tears his clothing, and puts ashes on his head and walks around in the temple and calls out ...” God Himself then sends Jeremiah to summon the patriarchs and Moses, who walk in a weeping procession adhering to ancient Near eastern customs: shaven heads, sackcloth, weeping, and lamenting. At this

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chel scene of *Lamentations Rabbah* in his discussion. The earlier version of my interpretation of this text (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 126–127) has been explicitly and implicitly criticized by readers who claim that I overturn Scholem’s unambiguous dating of the earliest Shekhinah as part of Godhead in the twelfth century, whereas I have, on one hand, not expressed any firm views on the passage’s dating – based on the reluctance of Pinhas Mandel, who has studied the philology of the text and with whom I have discussed this numerous times, to date it; and, on the other hand, I have not claimed that Shekhinah is part of Godhead in proem 25, or that Rachel is Shekhinah. See Stern 1992, 163, 174n35; (reprinted in Stern 1996), and others quoting him: Schäfer 2002, ch. 4; Green 2002, 17n172. But see the work of scholars who emphasize the continuities of mythical expressions from Rabbinic literature to Kabbalah, the foundational essay of Yehuda Liebes 1993, esp. pp. 47–54; Moshe Idel 2005, p. 66; Fishbane 2003; and with references to my discussion Pedayah 2013 and Asulin-Regev (in preparation). The comparison with the Mesopotamian weeping goddesses seems to add some validity to my suggestion that there is a condensed presence of female near-divine figures in this textual environment and that this is perhaps connected to the element of lamenting and its gendered phenomenology. Cf. also Mintz 1996, 59. Levinson (2005, 205–214) has with great theoretical sophistication analyzed the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 123a narrative about Rachel’s last-moment decision to aid her sister (see also the parallel in Megillah 13b), which actually focuses more on Leah than on Rachel, emphasizing the implications of Rachel’s trick for the ideological innovation of the Talmudic tale compared with the biblical tale. Kraemer (1995, 145), interprets the story as an expression of anger due to injustice, overlooking the gender issue.

<sup>53</sup> See Idel 1990, 1996, 2007; Miller 2013, 339–355. The name of the archangel, who appears only a few times in Talmudic-Midrashic texts, confirms the late dating but does not necessarily point to a specific place, time, or cultural context for the emergence of the proem.

<sup>54</sup> The traditional Hebrew commentaries on the word *gwh* vary, including honor, divine honor, secrets, and pride. The New King James version’s “pride” retains the polysemy of positive and negative values, whereas the JPS’s choice of “arrogance” exaggerates the negative aspect. Cf. above my note about the choice of Bible translation for the article, Q.E.D.

stage in this unusually long proem begins the most concentrated treatise about lamenting in *Lamentations Rabbah*:<sup>55</sup> Moses and Jeremiah wade through the piles of corpses of dead exiles from Judah to Babylon, where the surviving ones famously lament on the riverbanks (cf. Psalm 137). Moses tells the patriarchs about the horrible fate of their offspring in prose followed by the patriarchs' poetic lament, the only one in *Lamentations Rabbah*, using the spoken Aramaic idiom and, in what seems a natural rhetorical choice, focusing on the suffering bodies:

Woe that this has befallen our children,  
how you were like fatherless orphans,  
how you were struck by midday sun and summer heat without dress or cover;  
how you were pushed in lines stripped of shoes and without sandals;  
how you were carrying heavy burdens;  
how you were bound with your arms behind your backs;  
how you could not swallow the saliva of your mouth.<sup>56</sup>

The first point that I want to emphasize about this passage, which recapitulates a central theme in my argument, is how the pageant of weeping patriarchs performs the traditional gestures of lamenting, in parallel with the detailed description of bodily tribulations suffered by their exiled offspring. This brings our discussion of the bodily performance of lamenters full circle: just as the female protagonist of chapters 1 and 2 of the Biblical book of Lamentations is both the lamenter and the bereaved mother, the suffering individual and the singer of the dirges, so the bodily performance of the lamenting patriarchs aims to repeat or even mimic the actual suffering bodies of the objects of their lament. The dismembering of the victim is re-membered by the lamenter.

The second issue at the core of this essay that needs to be recapitulated is the gender of the lamenters. As mentioned above, the weeping god or goddess figures of the above-mentioned genre of city laments have a Mesopotamian heritage. This heritage creates a not-so-slight irony, if one considers that the book of Lamentations relates mainly to the victims of the Babylonians. However even this element of the ancient Babylonian tradition seems to persist in the *Lamentations Rabbah*. Toward the end of the long proem 24, offering a

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<sup>55</sup> See an insightful discussion with a different emphasis: Mintz 1996, 60–62.

<sup>56</sup> See Sokoloff and Yahalom 1999, on laments 27–33; *Lamentations Rabbah* is mentioned several times (27, 28, 30); laments for the destruction of the temple are also mentioned (28) and there are other liturgical poems (142–169) for 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, the day commemorating the destruction of both the First and the Second Temples. NB the repetition of the questioning rhetoric and the assonance “heykhi” similar to the mentioned above.

variety of treatments of the topic of laments and lamenting, after the patriarchs and Moses have failed to move the heart of the angry father God (whose weak and effeminate characteristics will be revealed in the next proem, 25) a remarkable scene is acted out.

At that moment Rachel leapt before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: “Lord of the universe, you know that Jacob your servant loved me exceedingly, and toiled for my father on my behalf for seven years. And at the end of seven years, when the time of my marriage arrived, my father advised that my sister should replace me, and I suffered greatly because his counsel became known to me. And I informed my husband and I gave him a sign so that he might distinguish between my sister and me, and my father would be unable to replace me. Later, I repented and suppressed my desire, and took pity on my sister so that she would not be shamed. In the evening, they substituted my sister for me with my husband, and I gave my sister all the signs that I had agreed on with my husband, so that he would believe that she was Rachel. More than that, I went under the bed upon which he lay with my sister, and when he spoke to her and she remained silent, I gave all the answers so that he would not recognize my sister’s voice. I was gracious, I was not jealous, and spared her shame and dishonor. If I, only flesh and blood, dust and ashes, was not jealous of my rival and spared her shame and dishonor, why should you, the everlasting and compassionate King, be jealous of idolatry, which is insubstantial, and exile my children who were slain by the sword, and let their enemies do with them what they wish?” Forthwith, the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, was stirred, and He said: “For your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place. And so it was written: “Thus says the Lord:/A voice was heard in Ramah, / lamentation and bitter weeping, / Rachel weeping for her children, / refusing to be comforted for her children, / because they are no more” (Jeremiah 31.14). And it is written: “Thus says the LORD: ‘Refrain your voice from weeping, / And your eyes from tears; / For your work shall be rewarded, says the LORD, / And they shall come back from the land of the enemy’” (Jeremiah 31.15). And it is written: “There is hope in your future, says the LORD, / That your children shall come back to their own border” (Jeremiah 31.16).<sup>57</sup>

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57 Hasan-Rokem 2000, 126–127, analyzed in some detail on 127–129; note that the NKJV, following the Vulgate, has a slightly different numbering of the verses, thus the Jeremiah 31.14–16 is in NKJV marked as respectively 31.15–17. The juxtaposition of the patriarchs’ failed lamenting with Rachel’s success recalls the Mother of Seven challenging Abraham in the most famous of Jewish martyrological tales (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 118). In Baal’s lament in CAT 1.3 IV of the *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle* (Smith and Pitard 2009), the editors point out (306) that the lamenting god actually borrows goddess Anat’s voice: “Perhaps there is a sense that it would be inappropriate for Baal to make such a request of El [the father, god, of both Baal and Anat] in his own voice.” Another element from the Ugaritic laments rather strongly echoed in proems 24 and 25 of *Lamentations Rabbah* is – according to Smith and Pitard – the traditional topos of the god complaining about having lost his house and his wife! (See Smith and Pitard 2009, 307; 311, 356–357.) Scholars debate whether Anat succeeded in her supplication to Baal, but agree that she was successful in another text, the Aqhat epic (Smith and Pitard 2009, 357), and in fact El consents to Baal’s wish to build himself an abode, too (Smith and Pitard 2009, 526).

Significantly, when Rachel the collective arch-lamenter turns to God to trade with him the deliverance of her figurative offspring, Israel, it is not her premature death that she laments and offers as token, but rather her life, the enduring of the burning passion of the added seven years of longing between her and Jacob.<sup>58</sup> The longing of those years, rather than the sacrifices offered by the patriarchs and Moses, is what, according to *Lamentations Rabbah*, moves God's judgmental stance toward a promise for Israel's redemption. Although the scene does not depict the performance of mourning I thought it worthwhile to quote this passage *in extenso*, not only because of its great beauty and sensitivity but also because it ends in the emblematic lamenting of Rachel in the Jeremiah verses. It thus demonstrates in a most concrete way the transformative relationship between Eros and Thanatos with regard to laments, the transformation of stored-up erotic energy into the power that can produce a lament so effective that it will move even the angry and despotic Divine Majesty. In this it indeed enables me to point to a new reflexive stage of recapitulation in the midrash *Lamentations Rabbah* of both of the major topics that I singled out as my focus of interest in the analysis of the Biblical book of Lamentations, namely the emphasis on the corporeality of the language of laments rooted in strong physical experience, and the Babylonian legacy of the lamenting gods and especially goddesses. In this unusual, powerful text, Rachel emerges almost as a weeping goddess, and certainly as a partner to God in the act of redemption.

The last narrative in the entire *Lamentations Rabbah* provides almost a punchline, an illuminating observation of the midrash on the relationship between destruction and various corporeal reactions to it, weeping and laughing, and their mutual transformability: *Lamentation Rabbah's* last narrative tells about four sages, one of them the leading scholar martyred by the Romans, Rabbi Akiva, who visited the ruins of Jerusalem after its destruction, where they saw a fox coming out of the house of the Holiest of Holies, the Temple. I quote:

They began to weep and Rabbi Akiva smiled. They told him: Akiva, you always confound us, we weep and you smile. He told them: And why did you weep? They told him: Shouldn't we weep as the place of which it is written, "The outsider who comes near shall be put to death" (Numbers 1.51b), and lo, a fox comes out from there to fulfill the verse

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Das 1996, who wisely characterizes women's transformation of the world turned strange by loss and pain into an inhabitable one – simply by enduring, in her beautiful essay in which she makes a strong plea for the importance of literature, especially fiction, in the process of producing such endurance after the emergence of modern modes of violence related to nationalism.

“Because of Mount Zion which is desolate / With foxes walking about on it” (Lamentations 5.18). He told them: And that is why I smile, as He says: “And I will take for Myself faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah” (Isaiah 8.2) ... but what did Uriah say? “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Zion shall be plowed like a field, / Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, / And the mountain of the Temple [literally: House] / Like the bare hills of the forest” (Jeremiah 26.18, quoting Micah 3.12, not really attributed to Uriah). And what did Zechariah say: “[Thus says the LORD of hosts:] ‘Old men and old women shall again sit / In the streets of Jerusalem, / Each one with his staff in his hand / Because of great age’” (Zechariah 8.4). And after that is written: “The streets of the city / Shall be full of boys and girls” (Zechariah 8.5). [...] I am happy that Uriah’s words have been fulfilled, since in the future Zechariah’s words will be fulfilled. And they spoke to him these words: You have comforted us, let you be comforted by the footsteps of the harbinger.

But readers of all generations know, especially if they have read chapter 2 of *Lamentations Rabbah* or its parallel in the Palestinian Talmud, where the failed rebellion of Shim’on Bar-Kosiba is told with its horrible results, that Rabbi Akiva himself may not be fully trusted for his historical vision.<sup>59</sup> Didn’t he, according to that text, hail Shim’on Bar-Kosiba as the King Messiah? In its multivocal wisdom *Lamentations Rabbah* presents the alternative to Akiva’s confidence as viewed against the backdrop of the imagined ruins of Jerusalem, with all the hermeneutic implications as mentioned above – the consolation perhaps emerging from Rachel’s weeping, turning messianic fulfillment and redemption into a transcendental project rather than a historical one, reaching far beyond the limits of the body and its performances, beyond motherhood and lamentation.

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- Tb* Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.

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<sup>59</sup> Mintz (1982, 76) also finds the story ironic in light of Rabbi Akiva’s death in a messianic endeavor.

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Vered Madar

## Women's Oral Laments: Corpus and Text – The Body in the Text

Oh Yoni how do you feel in the grave within this darkness?

Oh Yoni, Do you have a blanket and sheets? Do you have light or darkness?

You have neither a window nor a roof, the worms have eaten at you, and you have no  
way of escape

I have neither a window nor a roof, I have no blanket to keep myself warm

The worms have eaten at me and I have no way of escaping ...<sup>1</sup>

These lines are taken from an oral lamentation by women who were born in Yemen and immigrated to Israel during the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this essay<sup>3</sup> will be the relationships between performed women's lament within the practices of the Jewish community and the ways in which performance corresponds with the concept of death and modes of contacts with the dead.

Women's lamentations are oral works of art in which elaborate textual forms, bodily performance, vocal communication, and melody cross paths in

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1 This lament is one of two that I recorded from the lamenter Mazzal Zioni, who was born in 1935 in the village of Maḥtawiya, Baraṭ County, North Yemen, and immigrated to Israel in 1950. Here she is lamenting her relative Yoni, who was about 40 when he died. He left a wife and two small children. The text was recorded during an interview that took place inside a car an hour before she participated in the ritual over the deceased's fresh grave on the last day of the Shiv'a (a Jewish ritual to commemorate the death of any person). These were the only lines recited to me unaccompanied by melody. See Madar 2011, 2:89.

2 In the last few years I have interviewed about thirty women, all of whom were born in Yemen and immigrated to Israel during the 1950s. Since finding women for the research was quite challenging, I did not screen the women. Therefore, I was fortunate to record and analyze various traditions from all over Yemen. These traditions originate in tiny villages, small towns, and from the community in Ṣan'a, Yemen's largest city. In recent years, the performance of these lamentations has undergone a "withdrawal," and nowadays they are performed very rarely in their ritual context. By using the term "withdrawal," I refer to the well-known assumption in folklore studies that traditions do not altogether disappear but merely "fold in" for a while, so as to undergo transformations after which they reappear in different forms. Therefore, most of the texts comprising the basis of my research have been collected in an interview format, with the lamentation being performed to an audience of one – me.

3 This article is based on my doctoral dissertation (Madar 2011), and some of its main ideas were discussed in my paper during the conference "*Klage/Eicha*: Lament in Jewish Thought" at the Institute for Jewish Studies, University of Antwerp, 6–8 February 2013. I would like to thank Galit Hasan-Rokem for her comments on this essay. This article was written with the support of "Da'at Hamakom", the Center for the Study of Cultures of Place in the Modern Jewish World, Hebrew University.

a ritual context. Although it is a multidimensional cultural product, in this essay I will focus only on the textual dimension, with an emphasis on the thematic patterns that appear in it, and its figurative language. I will briefly discuss the relations between the female body that performs the lamentation and the dead body that appears in the text. In what follows, I will suggest that the lamenter's voice, breaking through the veil over her face, is shaped and structured as an acousmatic voice, detached from any source. I will connect this characteristic with the manner in which the departed person's voice appears in the texts, and also relate it to the semiotics of the female body in Kristeva's philosophy. In addition, I will also demonstrate that lamentation crosses constative and performative elements, and allows for a combination of the two by serving as a tool for the establishment of relations between the dead and the living.

## 1 Rituals and concepts in the “death space” of Yemenite Jewish communities

If one agrees that lamentations are a cultural expression of the way that individuals and communities grapple with death, a discussion of these lamentations must begin by an examination of the concepts of death in the relevant communities, in order to deepen one's understanding of these lamentations' cultural function. In this chapter I will discuss the relationship that the community has created with death and with the departed, while focusing on the treatment of the dead body, burial customs, and lamentation practices, which are relevant to my discussion of the lamenter's text, voice, and body.<sup>4</sup>

Various diseases, mortality of women during labor, mortality among babies and children, famine, and environmental hazards were among the causes of frequent premature death among all communities in Yemen (Yavnieli 1952, 40–50; Tzadok 1980, 299). I will probe social and gender-related aspects of the way in which the Jewish community in Yemen shaped the “death space.”<sup>5</sup> This term applies to all spheres of influence, action, ceremony, and text associated

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<sup>4</sup> I will not address here the Halakha [Jewish law] of mourning common to all Jewish communities; regarding the Yemenite practices I'll mention only those relevant to my discussion on women's lament. For more information, see Ratzabi 1999.

<sup>5</sup> I am following Metcalf and Huntington (1979), who decipher the ideology of societies and their views of the afterlife via the mapping of death and burial ceremonies.

with death in a certain cultural and social aspect.<sup>6</sup> Women associated with death because of their main role in death rituals become a part of this space almost permanently.

Death is one of the main topics in the lives of human beings, and it calls for interpretation. Throughout human history, there has been a back-and-forth movement of revealing and concealing death, denying it and showing awareness of its permanent, uncompromising presence in human life.<sup>7</sup> Understanding the meaning of death rituals in various societies has often been attempted through an examination of the eschatology of body and soul in these societies. In many cultures, the concept of the afterlife is vague and unfathomable, and therefore, a subtle mapping of the functions of the symbolic systems of the dead body and the death rituals can illuminate the concept. The symbolism of the human body and the way in which it is viewed in life and death, as well as the way in which these are reflected in mourning and death rituals, express some of the hidden social concepts of the individual's fate, and rules of social order (cf. Metcalf and Huntington 1979, 93–118).

In studies of death (Harris 2000, 89–99; Loraux 1998, 10–11), negotiations regarding the extent of influence of political and ideological changes, as opposed to unconscious factors, often take place. Bringing the two approaches together allows for an interpretive framework that views the changes undergone by various societies with respect to their death rituals as part of a continuous process of definition and redefinition, consciously or unconsciously, of the approach to death, and therefore to life as well (cf. Holst-Warhaft 1992, 14–15). The relations forged by the community with death and the departed will be the means by which I will connect death rituals with women's lamentations, which will be analyzed later in this essay.

## 1.1 The Conduct of Death in Yemen

The face of the deceased was covered immediately following death. If a man, this was done with a Tallit (the Jewish prayer shawl); if a woman, with a Šuqa

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<sup>6</sup> The “death space” is usually but not exclusively organized around the occurrence of a concrete death. Actions and symbols and rituals in which death appears will also be a part of that space outside the context of a specific death.

<sup>7</sup> The 1960s were a turning point and a significant rise in the number of studies of death has since occurred. This attests to a scholarly need and to an interest in examining the meaning of death among individuals and societies. See Holst-Warhaft 1992, 11. At that time, researchers from various fields were also interested in the subject of death: anthropologists, sociologists, socio-historians, and psychologists. See also: the bibliography compiled by R. A. Kalish, *Death*

(a black piece of cloth that women use to cover themselves when going out on the street). This act of covering the dead's face will resonate later with the lamenter's veil. The windows in the house were covered immediately, and if the departed had been mentally ill, they were opened wide (Qafih 1978 [1961], 247; Brauer 1934, 222). On the one hand, covering the windows can be understood as an act of keeping one's distance, if only for a short time, from the community that will penetrate the private sphere within a few moments, filling it with comforters and assistants in the burial and mourning ceremonies. On the other hand, opening the windows in the case of mental illness expresses the desire to protect the family from death, which may emanate from the room of the deceased and strike its members. This shift between opening windows and closing them is a metaphor for the mourners' house becoming a liminal space existing outside the social order but also within this order. This fact is essential to understanding the forms of death rituals that we will examine, and the way that women will appear in the aforementioned space.

At this stage the place is filled with women's voices and, as phrased by Rabbi Qafih, they "start wailing and screaming horribly, lamenting the departed with words and rhymes, according to their poetic ability" (Qafih 1978 [1961], 248).<sup>8</sup> The women's lamentations, by announcing the death with their voices, also serve to establish and demarcate a "death space."

After the departed is prepared for burial, his or her face is revealed, so that relatives can bid farewell. This contrasts with the covering of the face right after death so as not to disrupt the departed's serene exit, at the determined time, from this world.

Since there were no professionals to handle burial, after the people who had heard about the passing had assembled, there were those who volunteered to wash the departed and prepare the body for burial. Preparations were made by women or men from the community, in accordance with the gender of the deceased. In the Jewish community of the capital city of Şan'a, those who engaged in these tasks were members of the lower class and were regarded ambivalently by other members of the community. The lamenting women also belonged to the lower class.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, the actions of lamentation and

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and *Bereavement* (1965). It contains 408 publications, most of them from the beginning of the 1960s. This bibliography covers the scholarly boom at the time.

<sup>8</sup> From here onwards, all the descriptions of the ritual are from Rabbi Yosef Qafih's foundational book or recorded from the women I interviewed, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> Their low social status demonstrates the ambivalent approach toward them and their social role. On the one hand, they were appreciated for managing the ritual for the community, and on the other hand they were marginalized for being close to death and associated with it.

preparation of the departed were seen as being among the most charitable acts a person can perform for another person. On the other hand, these actions were viewed as undignified and marginal, and were regarded to some extent with contempt, for the direct contact with that which was denied and seen as demonic – death, embodied in its most material form in the body of the departed.

Throughout the preparations, the women voice “deafening cries and wails” (Qafih 1978 [1961], 248–249). Women were forbidden from participating in the funeral, regardless of the gender of the deceased, and in all the communities of Yemen they accompanied the men only up to the exit door of the house, and then resumed their lamentation in the courtyard or inside the house until the men's return. In some places, they even remained standing, according to the custom. In addition, whoever stayed with the mourning women inside the house was forbidden to leave the house of the deceased until the men returned. In 'Aden, mourning women were forbidden from leaving the house during the entire year of mourning, and even from “going near the window lest someone see them” (Amador 2001, 126). The restrictions imposed on the women before the return of the men, in the context of the funeral ceremony, were strict and significant, involving lengthy stages of standing, sitting down, and circling the body of the deceased. When lamentation was carried out, standing or sitting, the mourning women poured sand over their bodies, then crossed their fingers and held them over their heads (Ratzabi 1977, 34).<sup>10</sup> With veiled faces they lamented, accompanying their performance with the beating of various body parts, primarily the knees, the chest, and the head.<sup>11</sup> After the funeral, which took place in silence, the mourners returned home and sat on the ground, women and men separately. The women kept lamenting, this time sitting down, and did not cease until they were exhausted.

Here we can point to the way the women's bodies and voices intersect. The control mechanisms applied to their bodies, along with their veiled faces,

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**10** According to Ratzabi, the gesture was known as a symbol of mourning also among Muslims: “The sign of mourning is seen when the man puts his hand on his head and a woman on her cheek.”

**11** Brauer (1934, 222), Tzemach (1945, 306), Sapir (1951, 94), and others describe bodily motions accompanying lamentations, some of them dramatic and some not. In the women's accounts, the voice and the text are present, while the body and its motion are hardly mentioned. The women denied time and again the claim that the lament was accompanied by dramatic bodily movements that were uncontrolled or bursting its proper bounds. This sort of physical performance was always ascribed to the other: Arabs in Yemen, Moroccans in Israel, or Jewish women from other areas in Yemen. It seems that such “uncontrolled” bodily movement is viewed in the Israeli context as uncivilized conduct, hence it is denied.



contribute to a decoupling of the body from the voice, which characterizes the voice of these lamenters as acousmatic. But these control mechanisms over the body also function as an inverse mirror image of the feminine voice, which is forceful and escapes the reins attached to the body from which it emanates.

No tombstones were placed on the grave; instead it was covered with mud.<sup>12</sup> In northern Yemen the soil mound around the grave used to be fenced in by small stones called *Tziyun* [marking] in Hebrew, and there was no tombstone. In most places, people did not visit the tombs after the funeral, no commemorations were held, and when the departed were mentioned, this usually took place in public, on occasions with collective importance. For example, the Jews of Şan'a and Damar used to visit the cemetery on Tish'a Be-av,<sup>13</sup> and the Jews of Rada' used to do so collectively on New Year's Eve, an occasion when each person visited the graves of one's relatives (Amihud 1988, 31). In many places, the women's role was to arrive at the cemetery on that day and apply plaster to the graves, which amounted to continued care for members of the family and the cherishing of the burial places in memory.<sup>14</sup> This makes the cemetery a feminine ritual space,<sup>15</sup> and affirms the perception of the women's central, albeit not exclusive role in preserving communal and familial memory, a perception common to various societies.<sup>16</sup>

Even though one can suggest various cultural, economic, and religious reasons for the lack of tombstones,<sup>17</sup> we should bear in mind that this reality

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**12** From various testimonies and interviews, it seems that burial customs had changed in the decades leading to the big immigration to Israel (the 1950s): the Şan'a and 'Aden communities had begun to use tombstones, but in other areas the old custom of covering the grave with *Ḳulab* (a pulp made of earth, water and straw) had been maintained. This was made exclusively by the women of the community.

**13** Yosef Asta writes in his memoirs: "Tish'a Be-Av was day of fasting for all men, women and children. The women do not work for half of the day, in keeping with the traditional belief that at high noon, smoke billowed from the Temple. Only in the afternoon do they start to see to their household and some of the women go to the cemeteries in the morning to lament their loved ones. Some of them sit down on the earth and crush apricot seeds gathered throughout the entire year [...] symbolizing the heartbreak of the burning temple" (Asta 1987, 22).

**14** Hunter (1968 [1877], 54) notes that it was women's duty to visit the cemetery. Cf. Shilo (2005, 24), who states that the cemetery was a fertile ground for feminine activity, including the painting of tombstones and site maintenance.

**15** Håland (2008, 8) argues that the cemetery's demarcation as a feminine space stems from the fact that in many cultures, ritual lamentations at the cemetery are performed by women.

**16** The issue has been discussed in nearly all the studies of the relations between women and death. See, for example, Håland 2008, 7–12, in her introduction to a book by that name, and also Mukta's study (1999, 27) of women's lamentations in India in the colonial context, and their role in the context of communal memory.

**17** Maimonides's instruction not to visit the graves of the departed, the attempt to refrain from using Hebrew letters for daily tasks, the low standard of living in Yemen in general and among

intensified the role of other ways of commemoration and strengthened the women's role as bearers of the memory. Even though one may infer that the cemetery was a marginal place as far as many Yemenite Jews were concerned, a meaningful space was established within it. Jews and Muslims in Yemen held prayers there in times of trouble, such as famine, disease, drought, and political persecution. This space was an emergency "house of prayer," far from being marginal, and this use of the place was based on its mediation potential, as a crossing point between the world of the living and that of the dead, the place for bidding farewell (Bar-Levav 2002). A similar mediating role will be ascribed to the lamenting women, due to their significant role in the "death space."

During the entire seven days of mourning, friends and relatives arrive to console the mourners. Old men, who do not have to work, come to read from the book of Psalms and the Kabbalistic book of Zohar. Women arrive and join the lamenting women. The men read throughout the seven days, and the women lament only during the first three days. In various accounts of the mourners' house, there is a recurring report about the requirement that mourners sit still, speechless, and respond only with "amen" to those who console them. The latter used to say to the former, "May Heaven comfort you," upon arrival and departure. Zohara, a woman from the village of Arhab in central Yemen, concretely demonstrates how strict these rules were by stating: "The mourner's teeth were not to be seen." In addition, no physical contact was allowed during the blessings exchanged between the visitors and the mourners – no handshakes or kisses.<sup>18</sup>

The silence and the control of the voice in the space of the mourners' house intensify the presence of the lamenters' voice, heard throughout the entire first three days of mourning. This also intensifies the manner in which it constitutes a symbol of the communal mourning space.

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the Jewish minority in particular, and Islamic-Zaydiya influence: all are possible reasons for the lack of tombstones on the graves. Tobi (1986, 56) provides evidence from the writings of the dominant Zaydiyan school in Yemen, who strongly oppose the rituals of the dead that involve the construction of graves above the ground, as well as their ornamentation and inscription. The inscription of the name was barely permitted, and then only the name. See also Al-Yihye 2006, 353.

**18** I have asked several times about how mourning customs have changed in Israel, following the emigration from Yemen. In response, and usually voicing a strong rejection of the former custom, my interviewees have informed me that in Israel, plenty of conversation and chatting take place in the house of mourning, and visitors and mourners hug and kiss each other.

## 1.2 Yemenite women in the “death space”

In recent years, there has been an academic focus on the role played by women in the death space, their functions, and what can be inferred from their roles.<sup>19</sup>

This chapter will add to this fruitful dissection the Jewish women from communities in Yemen. As stated previously, women in Yemen were strictly forbidden from following the gurney of the deceased. This is strongly connected to the performance of lamentations and the temporal and physical space allocated to them. The prohibition was based on a combination of a strict Jewish Halakhic interpretation, a similar prohibition among the Muslims, and the tendency to minimize the presence of women in death rituals.

This prohibition appears in the Kabbalistic book of Zohar, stemming probably from the Babylonian Talmud’s tractate Berakhot 51A, where Yehoshua Ben Levi recounts three things that the Angel of Death had told him, including: “Do not stand in front of women who are returning from the dead, for I dance and appear before them with my sword in my hand, and I have the permission to do harm.” This means that it is the *women* in front of whom the Angel of Death dances; hence these women are a menace to the public when they return from the dead. This is not the case for men. This reflects a view of women as being close to the world of spirits, and their lamentations – a common practice among women returning from the dead – were associated with danger (see Aḥdut 1999, 172–173). As phrased by Shelomo Dov Goitein: “The words in a woman’s song, lamentation, scorn or blessing, not only convey emotions or opinions but also perform an action” (Goitein 1957, 281). Such a view of lamenting women as dangerous, due to their contact with the dead, is known in other cultures, too.<sup>20</sup>

The combination of female dominance in death rituals and the high anxiety triggered by death serves to illuminate the numerous physical and body-related restrictions and prohibitions imposed on women. The men all go out of the village or the Jewish quarter, and the women are left alone to lament. It seems that there is also a need to control the women when the men are gone. The ban on leaving the mourners’ house and the requirement of staying up-

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<sup>19</sup> Håland (2008) addresses the necessity of studying death to understand the development of societies. She also addresses the necessity of relating women and death, due to their pivotal role within that space in numerous cultures. According to her (2008, 2), an academic discourse of death can provide us with tools to understand the “dynamics that constitute both society and the cosmos.”

<sup>20</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992, 4) states that in ancient Greece as well as during the Christian era, the authorities clamped down on lamenting women, especially in rural areas of Greece, since the latter were perceived as a real threat.

right, let alone the instruction that the mourning women keep their hands over their heads, reflect the desire to prevent them from moving, so that nothing can happen when the men are gone.

At this point, during the washing and the preparation of the dead, the order that had been disturbed by death is reestablished.<sup>21</sup> The men once more run the ceremony, exclusively, while leaving the women to wait behind, lamenting and standing. This state of waiting expresses very concretely the establishment of the mourners' home as a liminal space in the buffer zone between life and death. This will be the case over the coming seven days. The women who stand and lament also embody the condition of the departed, situated between death and burial. Although they do not attend the funeral, they accompany it with their voices and with their bodies, awaiting the men's return.

Prolonged standing and lamentation involving bodily movement tire the women out, and their fatigue is a significant element in carrying out the lamentations. Ben-David thus describes the lamenting women: "The women's lamentations go on according to their strength. Since one has grown tired, her friend begins, and this goes on until they wash the dead" (Ben-David 2008, 47). All the women I interviewed mentioned the powerful moment when a lamenter's voice begins slowly to fade out due to fatigue, and another woman, with no prior sign, joins in immediately to "help" her.

Bodily fatigue, beyond functioning as an intersection of death and birth in the overall symbolic paradigm of the female body, also stresses the fact that lamentation is social work, a task, a role, as opposed to a voluntary leisure activity. Women are positioned here within a social paradigm in which they fulfill their duties, serving as "emotional representatives" for the community as a whole and the women's community in particular.

In addition, a restriction of women's lamentations to the first three days of mourning was imposed. This custom was justified by what is said in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Moed Katan 27B: "Do not weep for the dead, and do not pity him more than the right extent. In what way? Three days are for crying, seven for eulogy, thirty days for refraining from cutting hair and wearing pressed clothes. From this time the Lord says: you are not more merciful towards him than I am." In addition to the corroboration in the ancient texts,

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<sup>21</sup> For example, members of the community who came to assist in preparations did not take off their shoes at the entrance, as was the custom, and the separation between men and women was looser when they walked around the house, assisting the mourners and preparing the *Shiv'a*. This, along with communal bathing of the body created a space that was outside the social order, and this order had to be restored. One way of restoring the order was the strict ceremonial rules.

there was a popular belief that women's lamentation beyond the third day is for the "next departed." This belief served to control and silence expressions of grief through lamentation.

During lamentation, each of the women covers her face with the shawl used to cover her head, or with a small handkerchief, or with her hands. In the region of *Habbān* this covering was done with a white sheet. Various reasons for this custom have been given by the women I interviewed, some of them contradictory: some argued that this was intended to avoid creating a distraction in the public response to the occasion and the lamentation. Others felt that weeping made their faces ugly and that they had better not be seen. Others said they wanted to hide their tears, and still others claimed that the shawl was meant to conceal that the women were not really crying during the lamentation. As already mentioned, I interpret the shawl as a curtain, and the voice emanating from behind it appears to us, the listeners, as a voice without a body. Since the immigration to Israel, the death rituals have changed dramatically, but the few lamenters who perform during ceremonies nowadays are still careful to veil their face.<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of changes in the structure of the community and in concepts of death, various rituals have stopped serving as appropriate expressions for inter-generational cultural transmission within the women's community, and the oral tradition of ritualistic singing is fading away into the pages of academic research.<sup>23</sup>

Reviewing the discussions of the particular relationship between women and death, one learns that all over the world women are associated with death and fertility, and that they are often perceived as those who "give life" and "take life." Women's biological control over birth is analogous to their caring role with respect to the departed, in the sense of completing the person's life

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<sup>22</sup> In Israel, lamentation is undergoing a process of withdrawal, as stated previously. On the rare occasions when lamentations are carried out in a ritualistic context, the strict rules of performance seem to have been broken, and many changes are apparent: Restrictions on the temporal space allocated to the lamentations have been removed, and women lament during commemorations, after the first three days of the seven day mourning period, and at the cemetery. They do this standing or sitting, often being surrounded by both men and women. Their bodily movements that accompany the lamentation are very minor, but they still take care to cover their faces with shawls or other coverings.

<sup>23</sup> Extensive research was conducted on women's lamentations in various cultures: Greece, Karelia (Finland), Romania, etc. This kind of studies in a way preserve the voice of the women's lamenting, while at death rituals they are losing their preference and their value. Cf. Gamliel 2010, 70–90.

cycle. Women deliver humans and also send them to the afterlife by their participation in death rituals.<sup>24</sup>

This connection between death and birth is strongly embodied in the Yemnite women's lament, while being an appealing and powerful platform for feminine discourse on motherhood, where experiences of death and birth are intertwined and mostly expressed through the body. Numerous lamentation formulas deal with the bonds between the mother and her children. This is a strong bond whose strings extend from the deceased mother to her living children as well as from the living mother to her deceased children.

The mother-child relation is mediated by the lamenting woman, who is external to this relation but is also a mother herself. She is usually a woman who has known suffering and loss; often an elderly woman, though not always in the chronological sense of the word.<sup>25</sup> The text coming from her mouth is charged with meaning regarding the deceased person and her or his mother, but also regarding herself as a subject of bereavement. When the lamenter is a family member of the deceased, the text also becomes the ground for telling the story of a personal relationship.

The intensity of the mother-child relationship is often expressed by the localization of this relation in the human body. These relationships, which originate in the body, are relocated in various organs, the belly and all its internal parts, the womb and the nourishing breast. For example: "Weeping in the place where he grew," or "I dwelled inside the womb," or "He dwelled inside the belly, near food and water." All these expressions transform the internal organs, which are the material place where the bonds between mother and child are actually born, into a metaphysical place, where these bonds continue to exist in some respect, also after either the child or her/his mother depart from this life.

This part of the body also denotes the origin of the mutual feelings of mother and child, and – at the time of death – the origin of pain. We find recurring accounts of strong pains in their wombs among women who had lost their children, as well as labor-like contractions and bleeding, a form of physi-

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<sup>24</sup> Referring to the comparative, intercultural study conducted by Bloch and Parry, regarding burial rituals, Håland (2008, 7–8) notes that in various societies across the globe symbols of rebirth and fertility are often used in funerals and death rituals.

<sup>25</sup> The women usually mentioned these phenomena in relation to the deaths of their children, off the record. See also Dviri 2009, 269–274: "And the pain – in the beginning it is really physical: like a cold knife stuck into the heart [...] I also had a constant hemorrhage from the womb for a week [...] when I began writing and telling about my physical experiences, I got hundreds of responses from other mothers who said they had the same experience [...] and I thought I was a unique case. So did they" (my trans., from Hebrew). Regarding various ways in which trauma is manifested in the body, see Scaer 2005.

cal response to an announcement of the death of their children. These accounts seem to reflect the reality at the core of this textual motif.

Breastfeeding often occurs in the texts as the expression of the intensive mother-child relation, encompassing her nurturing power and the resilience of the breast-milk bonds between the two. As in songs for childbirth and other forms of feminine singing, breast milk is a leitmotif in laments, expressing the duty of children toward their mother in particular and their parents' household in general, also extended to include their duty and loyalty toward their communities.

Thus, breast milk joins the blood flowing from the aching heart, and bodily fluids are marked as a place where the mother-child relation is established. Moreover, the recurring formula, which declares the mother to be irreplaceable, is a direct continuation of the establishment of this mother-child relation in the body. This idea extends the existence of an emotional and physical bond between the two beyond this world, so that even death cannot obliterate these bonds (Hasan-Rokem 1999, 225).<sup>26</sup>

The mother-child relation is conveyed through questions and motherly gestures. Through simple actions and typical phrases, a warm and intimate relationship is depicted between a mother and a child, one alive, the other dead. She makes the child's bed, prepares food and takes care of all the child's needs. The lamenting woman addresses her dead child, or attempts to make contact with her or him, in order to keep caring for the child. This is done through fundamental actions such as feeding, or guarding against a cold wind or terrifying darkness: "Do you have sheets and blankets? / and is it light that you have or darkness?"; or: "If only the cemetery were a city / and I would enter, carrying food and water"; and in another example: "I will bring down some dinner for my daughter / and bring down some sheets and a blanket." After death, the children are not orphans. The mother still assumes her responsibilities toward the child, and the relationship between the two is portrayed as one that lasts indefinitely.

These motherly gestures have the power to elicit a sense of identification among those listening to a lament, as they echo any mother-child relationship, whether satisfying or not. The yearning for a nurturing mother, a protecting

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<sup>26</sup> Hasan-Rokem here discusses a text from Moed Katan 28A about Rav Seorim, who wishes to learn from a dead person about the essence of death, and the feeling that is involved in the process. Hasan-Rokem suggests that the occurrence there of blood and milk, which are feminine representations, within the walls of a male place of Torah study is used in the Talmudic text as an expression of intimacy between men in that place. Via these characteristics, the Jewish men who study the Torah import femininity into their place of study and into the situation around the subject of death and their connection with the departed.

womb that satisfies all of one's needs, lies at the core of this identification. The theme of praising the dead is also anchored in bodily descriptions. The deceased person's height, beautiful face, or diligent and delicate hands reconstitute the body and bring it back to life, full of beauty and vitality.<sup>27</sup>

This hermeneutic discussion on the mother-child motif in the texts enables me to suggest that in their texts the lamenters get back to what Kristeva calls *khora*, the physical space where the baby experiences the world and the mother as part of it. This is a pre-verbal space, where the semiotic expresses the baby's thrusts. The lamenters in a certain sense deny the symbolic, the lingual, and instead they remain within the semiotic, by basing the mother-child relationship on the breastfeeding and on the infant's pre-verbal gratification (Kristeva 1984 [1974], 26).

The mother's body in Kristeva's thought has a main and essential role in the process of acculturation. It is her body that mediates between the baby's body and language, and her body's rhythms enable the baby to move from the semiotic stage to the symbolic one. According to Kristeva (1986 [1977], 117–118), this body is also what enables mortals to bear death.<sup>28</sup>

The tremendous power of the mother's body is also reflected in the texts I am studying here and in the lamenters' role during death rituals. As I have shown, they have the textual power to revive and "redeliver" the dead into the world between the lines of the lamentations. This act marks their bodies as zones of active resistance to death. Their children, by the laments and through them, never die.

## 2 The textual corpus

Parry and Lord's (1954) research into Serbo-Croatian oral poetry supports the view that such songs are created at the time of their performance, using existing patterns. The fixed elements of such poems are the pattern and theme, existing within the framework of a musical rhythm that allows for flexibility

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<sup>27</sup> In studies by Nadia Seremetakis, who researches lamentations among the Mani women in the south of Greece, the association of women with death is emphasized when she claims: "to examine death in Inner Mani is to look at Maniat society through female eyes" (Seremetakis 1991, 15).

<sup>28</sup> "Women imbued with the desire to reproduce (and to maintain stability); women ready to help our verbal species, afflicted as we are by the knowledge that we are mortal, to bear up under the menace of death; mothers."



and the creation of variations on the patterns. In his later studies, Lord highlights “creation during performance,” or what he calls the “re-creation” of the song, as the central criterion in the definition of singing within the oral tradition, and explains that each performance of a song within the oral tradition is in fact a separate song, each performance is unique, and each performer leaves her/his personal signature in the song (Lord 1960, 101–102). Inspired by this insight, the textual analysis that I propose here will be arranged around textual and thematic formulas that constitute the basic building blocks of laments.

## 2.1 Speaking to and on behalf of the Departed

One of the central expressive formulas in laments in general, and in women’s laments in particular, is the addressing of the deceased. The audience’s recognition of death and its absoluteness elicits diverse emotional responses when the women address the departed. This direct appeal by the women defies the sense of absolute separation, and brings about anxiety on the one hand and fascination and excitement on the other.

In many laments, women address the departed numerous times, posing various requests or questions. In some of them, direct appeals to the departed constitute the entire text. Even though they are rarely “granted” a response from the departed in the textual corpus, it seems that through the power of speech alone, the texts succeed in representing the bonds with the departed. The lamentation excerpted in the beginning of this essay is a good example. The lamenting woman addresses the dead, asks about his condition in the world of the dead, and then responds on his behalf, while repeating her questions.

Appeals to the dead will usually include expressive statements: “Mother, *move* the [grave] stones away forcibly / so that they do not hit your forehead.” Or a widow mourns her husband, saying: “You could have asked for a postponement / until we *raised* the children” [my emphases]. Interrogative sentences, which characterize the genre (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 65–66), can be found in almost all the texts: “Mother, *what* drove *you* so swiftly to the wilderness?” or “*How do you feel* underground?” [my emphases].

These sensations are intensified by there being severe bans and restrictions against speaking to and with the departed. Jewish culture has always imposed such limitations in a variety of ways, from the Biblical story about the woman of *Ein-Dor* (1 Samuel 28) to the explicit ban on consulting a medium in the Torah and the Talmud.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, various Jewish sources testify to other means

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<sup>29</sup> See Deuteronomy 18.10–11 (King James Version): “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire ... Or a charmer, or a consulter

of communication with the dead, but this possibility has always been a charged and subtle issue.

The speech addressing the departed may be considered, especially when taking into account the rationalist view of Maimonides (which characterizes the dominant *Darda'i* school in Yemen), as a subversive alternative to the complete separation between the living and the dead. In contrast, when we examine this discourse in relation to Kabbalistic philosophy, or – later – Hasidic thought, laments may be seen as the means to fulfill the potential of communication with the dead.<sup>30</sup>

Another central theme in this genre is the appearance of the departed person's voice in the text. When the lamenting women address the dead, expectations of a response arise. The poetics of the text provides the lamenter with the freedom and the tools to mediate for us the response of the departed, thus fulfilling the audience's expectations. For example, when the lamenter addresses her dead mother she says: "Mother, is there darkness or light where you are? / said: where I am, there is darkness and loneliness, my daughter, and the worms are eating at me."

In another lament we hear the lamenter asking the departed: "What has brought you to death? ... / said: neither did I yearn for it nor did I pay wages to him [the angel of death] who has bought me."

In almost any occurrence of the voice of the departed, the lamenting woman begins with the verb *qal/qalat*, meaning "said." The verb appears without a preceding pronoun, that is, without an explicit grammatical subject. The only exception is to be found in the example I cited at the beginning of this essay, the only case in which the verb *qal* does not precede the reply given by the

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with familiar spirits [in the Hebrew: consuler with the dead], or a wizard, or a necromancer." Hasan-Rokem (1999, 227) examines the story of Saul, who visits a medium (1 Samuel 28) and asks to speak to the dead Samuel. The medium sees Samuel, and Saul only hears him. Hasan-Rokem (1999, 215) comments: "The separation of sensory systems in communication with the dead echoes the strong sense of detachment and fragmentation that is the hallmark of the perception of the dead by the living in Jewish culture". I believe that the addition of sense-related distinctions with gender-related distinctions when the man hears and the woman sees and hears may attest to the women's challenging of the Jewish concept of death. This possibility also arises from the contact the lamenting women establish with the dead in their lamentations.

**30** For examples of various relations with the departed, see Babylonian Talmud tractate Berakhot 18A regarding the prohibition from entering the cemetery with the Torah and phylacteries so as not to "mock the poor." i.e., the departed, see also the book of Hasidim, § 97, 122, 709, 710, with stories of conversations between the dead and with them in the cemetery, and Bar-Levav 2002.

departed. This may be because these were the only stanzas recited to me, while all the others were sung to the tune of a melody.

The preceding verb *qal/qalat* preserves the voice of the deceased without a distinct source. A voice, which the lamenters must be hearing, breaks through their vocal chords on behalf of the dead. This voice undermines, to some extent, the certainty that they are part of the world of the living, placing them in between the two worlds. The voice of the dead loosens the hermetic separation between the worlds, summoning the departed in their own voices into our world, and the lamenting women into the realm of the dead.

The philosopher J. L. Austin, in his very influential book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), points to the existence of *performative utterances* in language. According to Austin, in performative sentences the speakers do not describe a given reality, but create one as they speak. Such utterances have actual and functional power. They stand in contrast to constative utterances of truth or falsehood, which involve assertions about our world.

I suggest that we think of the lamentation genre as a challenging space of speech. The challenge stems not only from the difficulties we face when we try to speak about what is beyond our perception, but also from the fact that lamentations, to use Austin's terminology, tend to blur the distinction between performative and constative utterances.

I would like to suggest that constative utterance in lamentations also play a performative role. The occurrence of the deceased's voice in lamentations and the addressing of the deceased amount to an action. The line in a lamentation "Mother, is there darkness or light where you are?" amounts to an action in the textual space, when it is addressed to the deceased. This is all the more true when the latter respond with their voices. This bidirectional movement of voice between the realm of the living and realm of the dead constitutes, by virtue of a speech-act, a third realm where the living and the dead communicate, within the space of the lamentation.

## 2.2 The presence and absence of the word "death" in laments

A somewhat unexpected characteristic of the genre of these women's laments is the rare occurrence of the explicit word "death," yet the fact can hardly be ignored: On the few occasions when the word does appear, it is usually in the context of the textual formula "What did death tell you when it came?" to which we shall return later.

However, one cannot deny the presence of death in these texts. For example, in one woman's lament over her grandson, she asks: "Who put you to

sleep and blessed you / and gave you water to drink and broke your neck ...” With a certain degree of irony, she tries to find out who had taken good care of her beloved grandson, deceiving him and killing him after having won his trust. The woman employs the motif that occurs in numerous contexts: seduction and lust leading to disaster. Death occurs here as something tempting, inviting, and deceptive, but eventually delivering a final blow. This occurs with no explicit mention of death. In another lament, the lamenter says, using the pronoun “it” instead of “death”: “If it comes from God, welcome!” There are numerous other examples.

It is quite evident that the women did not shy away from terrifying and macabre descriptions of death, but perhaps, since real powers to summon “death” were ascribed to the explicit word, they usually refrained from uttering it.<sup>31</sup> However, it is my impression that the sporadic use of the term “death” also serves a textual function, which strengthens the lamentation’s potential of creating a place, or rather, a space – where the dead can remain “alive,” an idea to which I will return toward the end of the article.

The absence of the term is interesting also because it focuses our attention on those few times in which “death” does appear in its explicit denotation. As already mentioned, the great majority of these occurrences can be found in the women’s reference to a kind of imagined conversation that had supposedly occurred between the departed and death itself. The recurring question positions the lamenters as explorers striving to decipher the riddle of death, tracing only its voice, and not its nature nor its bodily shape.

In one lament, following the lamenter’s question about what has happened to the deceased, who had been strong and healthy until his final day, she herself responds with the stanza: “[Death] seizes him from behind, when he walks about.” We cannot be absolutely sure whether “walks about” is ascribed to the figure of “death” that wanders around, or to the departed who had been seized from behind all of a sudden. In any case, the two do not see each other, and death remains faceless.

In another lament, the scene of one’s possible encounter with death reaches a dramatic climax.

The lamenter asks: “What did death tell you the day he came / when he arose early and bought [you] / greeted you in peace with his right hand / [and] turned back his head.” In the description of this intimate encounter, in which death extends his right hand in peace, the audience is led to believe that the face of death will appear in a moment, but this does not happen. With the

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31 The recurrence of “death” but not through the explicit word can also be found in women’s songs for the woman giving birth, when they often use the “grave” as a simile for death.

extension of the hand, the body is pulled back. A more distant echo of the idea of a conversation with the Angel of Death appears in the following lines: “And I need you and depend on you / How dare you agree to go to the cemetery?” The lamenting young woman addresses her mother and wonders why she agreed to follow the Angel of Death who had come for her. The question presupposes that a dialogue between the two has taken place, or at least that an appeal was made to the mother by the Angel of Death, asking for her consent. This phrasing implicitly grants the mother the ability to refuse death, while its rhetorical structure denies her this ability, recognizing human helplessness in the face of the Angel of Death’s reaping sword. Perhaps this human helplessness and passivity gives birth to this imaginary view, which at first seems assertive but is in fact the opposite, since no real agency is assigned to the speaker. Such formulas shape the Angel of Death in women’s lamentations as an interlocutor. The echo of his voice can be heard even if one cannot escape his hands.

I believe that the recurrence of death as an incorporeal speaker lies at the core of the thematic and textual formula employed in lament. An incorporeal voice appears in numerous contexts when death is its explicit or implicit denotatum (Cavarero 2005, 104, 167–168, 266; HaCohen 2005, 122–123). This is an “acousmatic voice” that has no distinct source. It can be heard, but the listener cannot trace its position.<sup>32</sup> The term originates in the method by which Pythagoras’s students used to study. They were divided into two groups. One of them saw and heard Pythagoras, and the other only heard his voice, as he was hidden behind a curtain. This state raises questions as to the essence of listening and the relation between sight and sound.

Denis Smalley (2007, 38–39), who studies acousmatic music as a form of spatial perception, argues that acousmatic voices do not function in an existing space, but create the space by their function. In other words, voices without a source call on the listener to generate the space in which they function in order to form the “picture,” the image that is the absent source. Death as an incorporeal voice calls for taking the same action of creation, and this action receives no textual response. The lamenting women do not embroider the vision of death with their words; rather, their voice calls on the listeners to form the image. An incorporeal voice also has non-human authority. The absence of the speaker disconnects the vocal from the human, giving the voice a metaphysical status. The performance of lamentations is also echoed in the aforementioned

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<sup>32</sup> The first writer to use the term “acousmatic voice [or ‘sound’]” was the French composer and pianist Pierre Schaeffer, followed by Michel Chion, who focused on acousmatic sound related to film music. On the development of the term, see Kane 2007.

shaping of death as an “acousmatic voice” in the lamentation stanzas, since the lamenting women cover their faces, and so the voice of each is given an acousmatic, incorporeal characteristic.

Thus, the ritual's participants – the listeners – are witnessing the appearance of the death-figure as an acousmatic voice through the lamenter's acousmatic voice, which creates a *mise en abyme*, sweeping the listeners into a figure-less voice-space.

### 3 Rebirth of the human body in the lament

The pain of loss and the lamenter's feelings are also expressed quite often through the body and its organs. The mental agony sears the body, the pain burns the eyes and the face, and the loss consumes the internal and external organs of the body of the mourning family as well as those of the lamenter.

The reference to the body of the deceased between the textual lines, the shaping of the mourning body as an embodiment of pain and bereavement, the physical motions of the lamenters that accompany the performance are all, in my view, different forms of reaction to the ruin imposed on the dead body. The extensive references, in the text and by the lamenter, to the body in general and to the deceased person's body in particular charge the words of lament with a force to “overcome” death, mitigating the impression made by these words' own concrete descriptions of bodily decay.

In these texts, which are accompanied by a unique performance (on which I will not elaborate here), the lamenters refrain from taking up any of the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of the discourse on death. These aspects have the potential to comfort and pull the mourners away from the experience of loss, if only momentarily. Those women – who had given birth, breastfed, washed, dressed and caressed the body – seem not to let it decay. Instead they attract the listener, and hold him in the grave, among the clods of earth. The helplessness experienced by all human beings in the face of death is translated by the lamenters into a text and a performance, which constitute positions of resistance. The lamenters resurrect the dead, flesh them out, and create and place them among the living through the text.

The lamenting women implement what I call “the principle of continuity” on the dead. Their account of the departed person's life as being identical in almost every respect to the deceased's life in our world, the interest they express in what he or she eats, or in the extent of warmth or cold he or she feels – all are based on an assumption about a smooth transition into a world parallel

to the one we know. This allows for continuity in the relationships between the departed and those who are still alive.

In this, the final section of this essay, I have suggested that the figurative language of the lament, the intensive references to human flesh, and the description of the dead person's body bring the body back to life. The acousmatic voice that is "responsible" for this resurrection intensifies the action. A voice without a body (the lamenter) creates in the realm of the text a voiceless body (the deceased) in order to complete her "creation," the lamenter gives her voice to the dead's body and, in front of the listeners, they become one.

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## Section Three: **The Linguistic Form of Lament**



Werner Hamacher

## Bemerkungen zur Klage

### 1 Klagen

Geklagt wird über alles, über persönliches und gemeinschaftliches Leid, über die allgemeine Weltlage und den Geschichtsgang, den Ausgang von Wahlen und das Wetter, über Unpässlichkeiten, Krankheiten, Kriege, über Bosheiten und das Böse, darüber, daß Andere, und darüber, daß man selbst klagt; geklagt wird über „Gott und die Welt“. Kaum eine Form des Sprechens, die geübter und verständlicher wäre als das Klagen. Und doch setzen sich Klagen, ungeschützte Selbstpreisgaben, die sie sind, stets der Gefahr aus, zurückgewiesen zu werden, sei's in der Form einer Klage über das Klagen, sei's durch Spott, Ironie, demonstrative Indifferenz oder betretenes Schweigen – und es müsste zu denken geben, dass Ironie, Sarkasmus, sogar der Humor, und oft auch das Schweigen oder Verstummen Weisen des Klagens sein können. Klagen ist unbestreitbar, wenn auch beklagbar, eine der Formen, in denen wir uns zueinander verhalten. Es ist jedoch eine unserer befremdlichsten Verhältnisweisen, denn es wird zwar von Konventionen in gewissen Bereichen gerechtfertigt und sogar forciert, in anderen Bereichen tabuisiert, aber es ist so angelegt, dass eine Antwort darauf nicht immer erwünscht und meistens unmöglich scheint. Die Irritation, die vom Klagen ausgeht, lässt sich vielleicht am deutlichsten daran erkennen, dass zwar in zahllosen Varianten und Tonlagen geklagt, dass aber *über* das Klagen nur sehr selten gesprochen wird. Vielleicht findet die Sprachscheu vor diesem alltäglichen und dennoch extremen Phänomen eine zumindest partielle Erklärung darin, dass jede analytische Rede über das Klagen leicht den Eindruck erweckt, eine verkappte Fortsetzung des Klagens zu sein.

Um die Verlegenheit, in die Klagen jeden bringen, der sie hört und auf sie Antworten sucht, deutlich und deutbar zu machen, tut man gut daran, nicht nur die leicht und allzuleicht pathologisierbaren Formen, die das Klagen annehmen kann, nicht nur das chronische Mäkeln und Nörgeln, das einem gewissen Zwang zum Negativismus folgt – und sich in unseren Gesellschaften als „kritische“ Haltung erstaunlich leicht professionalisieren läßt –, nicht also nur dasjenige, das man pejorativ „Jeremiaden“ nennt und das eine sehr lange, unsere gesamte Kultur mitdefinierende künstlerische, rituelle und religiöse Tradition hat, sondern das Klagen überhaupt und das „Überhaupt“ des Klagens zu bedenken, das alle Grenzen des Alltagsgesprächs, der täglichen Kontakte und Verständigungsversuche ebenso wie alle Gebiete der sozialen Techniken – ins-

besondere des sogenannten Rechts –, der politischen Organisation – die immer eine Antwort auf die Frage geben sollen: Wer darf und wie darf er klagen? –, des Geschichtsbewusstseins, der Künste, der Religionen weit übergreift.

Denn es gibt schlechterdings nichts, dessen Vollkommenheit nicht bezweifelt, und nichts, dessen Zweifelhaftigkeit nicht beklagt werden könnte. Wenn es aber nichts gibt, das nicht auch Gegenstand einer Klage sein könnte, dann heißt das, dass nichts eine feste Basis für ein kommunikatives System, einen haltbaren Verständigungsgrund, einen universellen Zusammenhalt unter Sprechenden bieten kann, außer dem Klagen selbst. Aber vom Klagen wird, wenn es überall und immer möglich ist und sich auf alles beziehen kann, alles in irgendeiner kaum näher bestimmbar, vagen Weise ruiniert. Die Klage ist diejenige Sprache, die keine Bedeutung, kein Gewicht, keinen Wert, kein Interesse, keinen Glauben und keine ihrer Konsequenzen auf sich beruhen läßt. Sie weist allenthalben auf Mängel und Lücken in Äußerungen, Verhältnissen und Haltungen hin, auf Schäden, Fehler und Verfehlungen, und greift sie als Auslöser von Ungenügen, Unglück oder Leiden an, aber sie tritt nicht nur als Klägerin, sie tritt zugleich auch als Zeugin der Anklage auf und spricht vor einem Gerichtshof, der seinerseits vor ihrer Klage und ihrem Zeugnis nicht sicher sein kann. Beklagt und klagend bezeugt wird immer dasjenige, was *nicht* funktioniert, was *nicht* zur Verfügung steht, was *nicht* da ist. Beklagt wird also immer ein Verlust oder ein Mangel, eine Absenz, eine Abwendung oder ein Zerfall. Beklagt wird ein Ruin, und mit der Klage, die ihn aufweist, zieht der Ruin in die Sprache, mit ihr in die gesamte Erfahrungs- und Denkwelt, in alle geselligen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse, in das Miteinanderreden und -leben ein. Die Sprache der Klage ist die Sprache einer Zerstörung, die prinzipiell grenzenlos ist.

Man könnte deshalb erwägen, von der Klage als einer Erscheinung des Todestriebs in der Sprache zu reden. Für die Klage ist alles leer, alles gleich und alles vorbei. Dass alles leer ist und gleich und war, das ist die Formel für den Nihilismus, die Nietzsche seinem Zarathustra in den Mund gelegt hat. In der Klage sind wir also, ob wir es wollen oder auch nur recht merken oder nicht, einem ebenso universellen wie unheimlichen Phänomen ausgesetzt, dem Phänomen einer Sprache, die über sich und ihren Verlust, über sich als ihren Verlust nur noch klagen kann. Daß einem die Worte fehlen und es einem die Sprache verschlägt, diese Klageformeln besagen, dass sie nichts anderes aussagen als die Ohnmacht der Sprache, besagen also, dass sie nichts sagen und der Klage keine andere Sprache als die einer widersprüchlichen formulaischen Wendung verleihen können. So wenig sie einem Missstand oder Missverhältnis entspricht, so wenig entspricht die Sprache der Klage dem Verständnisvermögen derer, an die sie sich wendet. Sie ist immer auch Klage darüber, dass

der ihr gemäße Adressat fehlt. In einem der berühmtesten Klagelieder unserer Geschichte, in den Klagen des Jeremias, stehen die Worte: „Wenn ich auch schrie und flehte, / verschloß er sich meinem Gebet“ (3.8). Es ist von Gott die Rede, von dem schlechthin unverfehlbaren Adressaten, von demjenigen, von dem man annehmen sollte, dass er immerzu da und sein Ohr stets allen Anrufungen, Lobeshymnen wie Klagegesängen, zugewandt ist. Diesen Klagen scheint er sich zu verschließen. Und wie am Anfang der Klagetradition, der wir *nolens volens* immer noch angehören, so verhält es sich an ihrem Ende. In einer der bekanntesten Elegien der neueren Literatur, nämlich in Rilkes erster „Duineser Elegie“, lautet die Eröffnungsfrage: „Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn [...]“. Das heißt: Selbst wenn ich schrie, könnte mich vermutlich niemand hören. Umso weniger hört mich jemand, wenn ich spreche, noch weniger, wenn ich flüstere, noch weniger, wenn ich seufze. Ich rede, aber diese Rede ist an niemanden gerichtet, von dem ich annehmen könnte, dass er sie aufnimmt. Die Klage ist also, deutlicher oder weniger deutlich, immer auch eine Klage darüber, dass sie nicht vernommen und im Vernommenwerden allererst zur Klage werden kann. Sie bestreitet mit ihrem Klagecharakter zugleich ihre Sprachlichkeit.

Wer klagt, der klagt darüber, nicht sicher sein zu können, *was* er tut, und nicht sicher, *ob* er überhaupt etwas tut. Die Klage ist also eine extreme, eine Grenzform der Sprache, von der, obwohl oder gerade weil sie bestreitet, Gehör finden zu können, sich jeder in irgendeiner Weise angesprochen fühlen muss. Aber wer ist dann dieser Jedermann, der sich angesprochen fühlen muss, wenn doch niemand diese Klage, wie in den Liedern des Jeremias und in den Elegien von Rilke beteuert wird, vernimmt? Fühlt sich jeder von der Klage an niemanden angesprochen, dann muss es in jedem die Möglichkeit geben, genau dieser Niemand zu sein, eben derjenige, der von der Sprachvernichtung in der Klage betroffen und als Adressat gelöscht werden kann. Jede Klage sagt: „Du hörst mich nicht. Du, an den diese Klage gerichtet ist, bist nicht da. Du bist nicht Du“. Doch gerade weil wir in ihr als Abwesende angesprochen werden, richten wir unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf die Klage. Wir richten sie auf die Möglichkeit, selber nicht da zu sein, geleugnet, vergessen oder vernichtet zu sein. Das kann, wie angedeutet, sogar einem Gott geschehen – und, allen Göttern voran, Gott. Tatsächlich gibt es in der monotheistischen Tradition solche Klagegesänge, in denen es Gott ist, der klagt – zum Beispiel über den Ungehorsam seines Volkes oder die Zerstörung seines Tempels. Reichweite und Gewicht der Klage lassen sich also in keiner Weise begrenzen. Die Klage geht einer Unendlichkeit von Verlusten und Abwesenheiten nach. Sie bestreitet, explizit oder implizit, durch ihre Struktur oder ihren semantischen Gehalt, dass sie eine Antwort finden könnte, die nicht ihrerseits wiederum Gegenstand einer Klage wäre. Sie stellt

aber nicht nur die Möglichkeit einer Antwort, sie stellt das Wort überhaupt in Abrede – sie ist das Paradigma einer Sprache gegen die Sprache, einer Selbstzuwendung, die zugleich Selbstabwendung ist, und die in der mehr als bloß paradoxen Verbindung zwischen Verbindung und der Lösung aller Verbindungen die konstitutiv dekonstitutive Struktur dessen freilegt, was wir ihre Sprachlichkeit nennen.

Die Frage – und auch die Frage kann ein Modus der Klage sein –; die Frage, die angesichts dieser strukturellen Traumatisierung des Sprechens zu stellen ist, lautet: Wie lässt sich auf Klagen dennoch antworten? Wie lässt sich antworten auf eine Sprache, die jede Antwort zurückweist? Und wie lässt sich so antworten, dass dabei die Klage nicht psychologisierend als bloßes Symptom einer vermeidbaren Trauerkrankheit, nicht als Abnormität und nicht als Zufall behandelt wird?

Da die Klage die eigentümliche Kraft hat, mit jeder sprachlichen Verbindung auch die Verbindung zu sich selbst und somit ihre eigene Konsistenz und Kontinuität in Abrede zu stellen, tilgt sie auch die Zeit. Sie ist nicht nur monoton und führt durch ihre Monotonie die ewige Wiederkehr des immer Gleichen der Klage herbei, das jede Veränderung in der Zeit ausschließt, sie vernichtet durch ihre Monochronie die Zeit, sofern diese eine Zeit der Veränderung, des Noch-nicht und einer als Verwirklichung des Noch-nicht gedachten Zukunft ist. Da sie sich auf die gesamte Erstreckung der Zeit und der mit ihr eröffneten Möglichkeiten bezieht, führt sie mit jeder Geste, in der sie sich bekundet, an die Grenze der Zeit und springt aus ihrer Monochronie über in Anachronie. Sie verhält sich aber anachronistisch nicht nur innerhalb einer gegebenen, bemeßbaren Zeit, sondern zu jeder Zeit, nicht nur zur vergangenen – und deshalb beklagbaren –, sondern zur künftigen – und als noch bevorstehende fehlenden und deshalb gleichfalls beklagbaren – und auch zur gegenwärtigen, die von der Klage ausgehöhlt werden und deshalb nur eine nichtige sein kann. So sehr also die Klage das immerwährende Vergehen der Welt betreibt, so sehr sie jede Welt zu einer „bloß“ zeitlichen macht und derart selber die Zeit der sprachlichen Welt ist, so sehr ist sie, als dieses Geschehen der Zeitigung, auch schon am äußersten Rand und außerhalb aller Zeit. Was immer an-, heran- oder abwesend ist, wird von der Klage einer Un-Zeit ausgesetzt, die weder gegenwärtig noch zu erwarten, weder leer noch erfüllt, weder vergangen noch ewig, sondern keine Zeit und als keine auch keiner temporalen Charakterisierung fähig ist. Die Klage skandiert die Zeit der sprachlichen Welt durch die Tilgung jedes *ist*. Sie insistiert darauf, daß diese Zeit dieser Welt imprädikabel und dass sie, diesseits aller möglichen Aussagen über sie, im vehementesten Wortsinn *unsäglich* sei. Sie selbst bekennt sich als erste zu dieser Unsäglichkeit und bezeugt sie, indem sie ihre eigene Gegenstands- und Adressatenlosigkeit, ihre

Grund- und Aussichtslosigkeit herausstellt und die formalen, semantischen und pragmatischen Konventionen ihrer Artikulation in jeder Weise unterläuft, verzerrt und zerstört. Nichts, das gesagt werden kann, nichts, von dem ein *ist* gesagt werden kann, das von ihr nicht versehrt würde. Da sie in Abrede stellt, dass es ein Ende des Klagens geben könnte, und darauf besteht, jede begrenzende Antwort beklagbar, anklagbar und kläglich zu finden, gibt es für sie keine Zukunft – und das heißt zunächst: keine Zukunft der Sprache –, die von ihr nicht wiederum nur abgewiesen, es gibt keine Wiederkehr und keine Unendlichkeit der Klage, die von ihr nicht verworfen werden müsste. Die Klage ist also in jedem ihrer Momente auf dem Sprung aus der Sprache, der Gemeinschaft, der Welt und der Zeit hinaus –: sie durchläuft die Bewegung zur Atopie, zur Achronie, zur Asozialität und ist deshalb die lauterste Zeugin dessen, was in jeder Sprache *a limine* unweltlich und unmenschlich ist. Sie kann es aber nur sein, weil sie in sich selbst die Sprache und das Sprechen in seinen konstitutiven Formen und Elementen in Abrede stellt und allem von ihr Angesprochenen seine Substantialität, seine Beharrlichkeit und somit seine Ansprechbarkeit abspricht. Sie ist die Sprache der Differenz und der Differenz noch *von* der Sprache und *in* ihr.

Klagen beschränken sich nicht darauf, deutlich begründete Anklagen mit einem bestimmten Zweck vorzutragen. Anklagen beziehen sich in aller Regel auf strittige und bestreitbare Sachverhalte, die Gegenstände eines Gesprächs, einer Debatte oder eines juristischen Prozesses werden können. Vor einem Gericht kann Klage gegen Schädigungen geführt werden, die von der Rechtsordnung definiert sind, aber diese Schädigungen werden, zumindest in absehbarem Umfang, für behebbar gehalten. Die Klage ist in diesem Fall endlich; die streitenden Parteien können mit ihr „ins Reine“ kommen, wenn sie den gesellschaftlichen Konventionen und den Institutionen ihrer Sicherung zustimmen. Das indessen ist so selten der Fall, dass auch nach der Beilegung eines Streits, ob er nun Rechtsstreit oder bloße „Meinungsverschiedenheit“ war, die Beteiligten, oft genug auf Dauer, zu klagen nicht aufhören. Klagen, deren Umfang und Intensität juridisch schwer erhebbar sind, da sie außer den offen vorgetragenen auch uneingestandene, verleugnerte, verschwiegene und unbewusste Klagen und ihr langes Echo umfassen, gehen über jede endliche, auf einen bestimmten Gegenstandsbereich und eine überschaubare Situation begrenzte Anklage hinaus. Sie führen ihre eigene Grenze, jeweils einen bestimmten Fall oder Ausfall, nur mit, um sie zu überschreiten, im einzelnen Fall den Fall von Allem zu beklagen und sich – man spricht verächtlich von Querulanz – ins Unendliche fortzusetzen. Keine Klagestatuten und Klageschranken können sie aufhalten, denn sie erstrecken sich auf prinzipiell alles, und an allem beklagen sie jeweils dies, dass es eben *nicht* Alles, *nicht* ganz, *nicht* vollständig, *nicht* da



ist. Sie stoßen also nicht nur auf ein Nicht, sie suchen nach ihm; decken es nicht nur auf, sondern öffnen es und forschen in ihm nach dem, was als Nichts noch jeden besonderen und beschränkten Mangel übertrifft. Auch das Un-endliche kann deshalb der Struktur der Klage nicht genügen; es wäre bloß die Abweisung von Grenzen, die im Verlauf dieser Abweisung immer wieder aufs Neue gezogen und immer wieder aufs Neue getilgt werden könnten. Die Klage setzt sich aber nicht nur fort, indem sie alle Besonderheiten und Begrenzungen verwirft; sie verwirft noch ihre Fortsetzung, ihre Kontinuität, ihren *progressus ad infinitum*, weil gerade er keine Saturation gewährt, und setzt derart als absolute Klage auch noch die Fortsetzung der Klage *fort* und setzt sie *aus*. Da sie ebenso un-endlich wie un-unendlich sein muß, kann sie nur dieses *Un* sein und dieses nur in der ontologisch nicht fassbaren Weise des *Unseins*. Die Klage ist kein mögliches Thema einer Ontologie.

Zur Sprache zu bringen, was, *ohne* gegenwärtig zu sein, dennoch in aufdringlicher Weise „da ist“, das ist der Wunsch, der die Klage antreibt. Sie versucht, nicht nur *vom* Nichts zu sprechen, wie die Philosophie es seit Parmenides getan hat, um es aus dem Bezirk des Denkbaren und Sagbaren auszuschließen; sie sucht, *das* Nichts zur Sprache zu bringen, sei es das jeweilige Nichts dessen, der spricht, sei es das davon kaum unterscheidbare, das alles Sprechen begleiten muß, sofern es Sprechen von Abwesendem ist. Nicht nichts sagen, sondern das Nichts sagen: das ist der Wunsch, dem die Klage nachgeht. Würde ihr Versuch gelingen, dann wäre das Nichts Sprache geworden, bedeutungslos, gegenstands- und adressatenlos, aber Sprache und als solche, wenn auch nicht ungebrochen, anwesend; dann wäre aber diese Sprache zugleich auch Nichts und als dieses, wenngleich nicht ohne Rest, abwesend. Die Arbeit der Klage bestünde deshalb darin, die unmögliche Gleichzeitigkeit von Sprache und Nichts in eine diskrete Folge auseinanderzulegen und jeweils aufs Neue den Versuch zu unternehmen, das schlechthin Abwesende zur Anwesenheit zu bringen. Die Klage wäre mithin der Weg zum Anfang der Sprache, der noch *vor* diese zurück zur Sprachlosigkeit führt. Sie wäre, gegen jeden Anschein einer logischen und psychischen Abnormität, wie er seit langem besonders von der formalen Logik und den Psychologien erweckt wird, die denkbar redlichste Sprache des Beginnens der Sprache: ihres Anfangens und ihres Geschehens. Ihre größte Gefahr läge darin, sich in Klagen über das Klagen zu ergehen, sich als nichtig zu denunzieren und somit ihren Geschehnischarakter zu verkennen.

## 2 Ausdruck

Die Sprechakttheorie versucht, Umfang und Struktur der Klage unter dem Aspekt der Handlung und, genauer, unter demjenigen einer Ausdrucks-Handlung zu charakterisieren. Ohne auf die Spannung und sogar Unverträglichkeit zwischen den beiden Begriffen der Handlung und des Ausdrucks näher einzugehen, bestimmt sie Klagen als einen Akt der Expression. J. L. Austin (1975 [1962], 160) ordnet sie der Gruppe der von ihm *behabitives* genannten Äußerung von Gefühlsreaktionen zu. Da Akte in der Sicht dieser Theorie nur als Akte innerhalb einer bereits gegebenen Konvention und unter der Bedingung der Zustimmung zu dieser Konvention vollziehbar sind, ist der Ausdruck, den sie einem Affekt verleihen sollen, jeweils bestimmt als Ausdruck eines zuvor schon nach Konventionen präformierten Inneren, eines zustimmungsfähigen Gefühls und einer prinzipiell sozialisierten Affektsprache. Kein Akt, der diesen Bedingungen nicht genügt, kann nach Austins Formulierung „erfolgreich“ oder „glücklich,“ keiner kann überhaupt ein Akt sein, der als solcher erkennbar, anerkennbar und beantwortbar ist. Klagen *über* „unglückliche“ und „erfolglose“ Sprechhandlungen können zwar „glücklich“ und „erfolgreich“ sein, doch nur dann, wenn sie ihrerseits den Klagekonventionen konform sind. Dann und nur dann also sind sie „glückliche“ Klagen, gesellschaftsfähig und erfolgreich, wenn sie keine Klagen, sondern Zustimmungen, keine Ausbrüche aus einem etablierten Verhaltensschema, sondern dessen Bekräftigung sind. Die Sprechakttheorie verbannt, kurzum, sowohl die Klage wie jeden anderen Affekt und Affekt-Ausdruck aus ihrem System, um die Handlung zu sichern, und sie verbannt die Handlung aus ihrem System, um die Handlungssystematik, die Synthesis von Handlungen und die prästabilisierte Harmonie zwischen ihnen zu sichern. Ist für sie Handlung nämlich nach Konventionen wirksame Handlung, so ist sie formal nichts anderes als die Bestätigung jener Konventionen und somit, paradox, sowohl eine Handlung, die ihre allgemeine Form erfüllt, wie eine Nicht-Handlung, die sich von jeder handelnden Einwirkung auf ihre Form zurückhält. Der Begriff „Sprechakt,“ wie er von der einschlägigen Theorie verwendet wird, ist also ein Antonym: er bezeichnet weder einen Akt, noch bezeichnet er einen sprachlichen Akt, sondern ausschließlich eine Mechanik des Verhaltens nach einem vorgesetzten Funktionenprogramm.

Da Konformitätsakte nur „glücklich“ ausgehen, weil sie gar keine Akte sind, ist mit ihrer Bestimmung zugleich eine Kontur für jene von der Sprechakttheorie ausgeschlossenen „unglücklichen“ Akte gefunden, die zumindest die Chance haben, die Konformitätsbedingungen, unter denen sie wirksam werden können, zu verändern und damit in der Tat Aktcharakter zu gewinnen. Diese Akte können nur solche sein, die unabhängig von Sprechhandlungsnormen,

ihnen voraus und ohne Hinblick auf ihre Erfüllung unternommen werden, also nur solche, die nicht konventionell sind, auf keinen Konsensus bauen und weder Ritualen noch Routinen entsprechen. Das heißt aber, „Klage-Akte“ müssen nicht nur Klagen ohne Rücksicht auf Gehör und Wirkung, ohne Absicht und Adressaten, sondern in jedem Sinn „unglückliche“ Sprechhandlungen sein, nämlich zum einen vom Unglück zeugende, zum zweiten Intentionen verfehlende, zum dritten keiner Verständigungsregel konforme: zu schrill, zu gedämpft, zu brutal, zu verzweifelt, zu wenig sprachlich oder zu exzessiv aktiv. Ohne gemeinsames Maß mit den an derlei Äußerungen geknüpften Erwartungen und deshalb ohne ihre vorab gesicherte Anerkennung *als* Klagen, müssten sie wesentlich anomisch, asozial oder anti-sozial erscheinen und es dürfte nicht einmal als gesichert gelten, dass sie dem Bereich der Sprache – sei’s einem bestimmten Idiom, sei’s der menschlichen Sprache überhaupt – zugezählt werden können. Nur dann also, wenn sie schlechthin bedingungslos und ohne vorbestimmten Horizont sich äußern oder ihrer Äußerung sich entziehen, sind diese Klagen überhaupt Klagen. Sie sind es nur, wenn sie die Parameter ihrer Determination, mit diesen aber jede Sprache unterlaufen, durch die sie identifiziert werden könnten als das, was sie sind. Daß Steine kreischen, ist keine poetische Metapher; dass extreme Regungen sich in einer Tiersprache äußern, kein physiologischer Befund; dass alle Natur zu klagen anhöbe, wenn ihr Sprache verliehen würde, wie Benjamin schreibt (*Sprache*, 155), keine metaphysische Hyperbel eines Melancholikers, sondern sachliche Bestimmung der Horizontlosigkeit dessen, was Sprache und sprachliches Handeln ohne konventionalistische Anerkennungsnormen heißt. Wie jedes Sprechen muß auch das Klagen in allen seinen Dimensionen – als Verbalisierung, Thematisierung, Adressierung, Mitteilung und Einwirkung – scheitern können, wenn es Klagen, sprachliches „Handeln,“ Sprache soll sein können. Nur von dieser extremen Möglichkeit – der notwendigen und deshalb immer schon wirksamen Möglichkeit seiner Unmöglichkeit – her lässt sich die Sprache und lässt sich ihr Extrem, die Klage, denken.

Die sprechakttheoretische Restriktion der Klage auf einen „expressiven“ Akt begeht also nicht nur einen methodologischen Fehler, sie wird dem Phänomen der Klage nicht gerecht, weil sie dessen Entzug ins Aphänomenale nicht als konstitutiven Zug dieses Phänomens erkennt. Man tut deshalb gut daran, diese Restriktion fallen zu lassen und sich in der Analyse der Klage demjenigen zuzuwenden, was in ihr die Grenzen der Sprachkonventionen, die Grenzen ihrer Gemeinschaftlichkeit, ihrer Menschensprachlichkeit und vielleicht ihrer Sprachlichkeit überhaupt durchbricht. Um die Klage als einen Akt des Regelbruchs und des Zerbrechens noch ihres Aktcharakters, um sie als Anti-Akt und als anti-sozial, als Anti-Pakt und als Passion zu verstehen, ist es geboten, die

Wendung von der „stummen Klage“ ernst zu nehmen und die unendlichen Serien von Klagen über alles und jedes auf eine immer unausgesprochene, unausdrückliche und ausdrucksunfähige Klage zu beziehen. In der Klage, die ausdruckslos bleibt, deutet sich an, daß sie eine Klage über die Sprache selbst, eine Anklage gegen das Sprechen, ein stummer Aufstand gegen das Reden ist.

Könnte der Klagende präzise ausdrücken, was er empfindet, er würde nicht klagen, sondern beschreiben, begreifen und den Gegenstand seiner Klage, ruiniert und ruinös wie er ist, unter seine Kontrolle bringen. Die Klage ist aber kein theoretischer, prädikativer Diskurs der Bestimmung von Gegenständen und Verhältnissen, sondern sie ist Klage darüber, dass jede Kontrolle über die Sache und über die Sprache, die sie erfassen könnte, versagt. Sie ist nicht ein bloßes Verhältnis, sondern ein Verhältnis zur Versagtheit genau derjenigen Verhältnisse, die sie herbeizuführen versucht, ein Verhältnis zur fehlenden Homeostase zwischen Innerem und Äußerem, zur mangelnden Korrespondenz zwischen dem, was sich fühlen, und dem, was sich sagen lässt, zur ausbleibenden Kontinuität zwischen den Phasen des Fühlens, zwischen Fühlen und Fühllosigkeit, zwischen Äußerung und Bedeutung. Beklagt wird jeweils, was versagt ist. Versagt ist dem Klagenden aber jede Art von Verhältnis, das Kohärenz und Konstanz, Konformität und Konsistenz bieten könnte. Seine Klage ist ein Verhältnis zum Verhältnislosen. Deshalb werden Klagen immer wieder mit einer zweideutigen Wendung als „unverhältnismäßig“ eingeschätzt. Sie kennen kein Maß, keinen Halt und keine Grenze, weil sie sich stets auf das beziehen, was nicht da ist. Da die Klage aber halt- und grenzenlos ist, kann sie auch nicht auf ein Inneres begrenzt sein; da ihr keine „Privatsprache“ der Innerlichkeit gegeben ist, die durch Verlautung, Mimik oder Gestik nach Außen übertragen werden könnte, gibt es für sie kein Inneres, das „ausgedrückt“ werden könnte. Ausdruckslos ist die Klage nicht, weil sie kein adäquates Medium ihrer Äußerung finden kann, sie ist ausdruckslos, weil sie nichts hat und nichts ist, an dem sich ein stabiles Inneres konstituieren und von einem Äußeren unterscheiden könnte. Sie ist ausdruckslos, weil sie die Bewegung des schieren Außer-sich durchläuft – die Bewegung nicht der Sonderung einer inneren von einer äußeren Sprache, nicht einer Welt von einer zweiten, sondern die Bewegung der Sonderung der Welt von der Welt, der Sprache von der Sprache und somit der Bewegung selbst von jeder Bewegung. Was in der Klage, der ausdruckslosen, stummen, was im Schmerz geschieht, ist ein Riß durch die Sprachwelt insgesamt – und also deren Öffnung auf das hin, *was* die sprachliche Welt nicht ist, und darauf, *daß* sie nicht „ist.“

Ausdruckslos, unartikulierte und stumm ist im Extrem die Klage, weil sie die Bewegung *vor* eine Welt aus Sprache zurück ist, vor eine gemeinschaftliche, konsistente leibliche und seelische Welt zurück in ein Verhältnis zum An-

haltlosen, in dem nichts anderes mehr faßbar ist als dies, daß es überhaupt „da ist,“ ohne daß es ein Etwas wäre, und ohne daß sich dieses Daß anders darböte denn als Entzug jeder Möglichkeit einer Existenzaussage. Die Klage ist in ihrem Extrem, und darum durch und durch, die Sprache der Versagung der Sprache. Deshalb kann sie als Geschehen der Scheidung und des Abschieds von sich als Sprache wie von sich als Klage charakterisiert werden. Da der Riß, der sich mit ihr öffnet, das Grundgeschehen dessen ausmacht, was Sprache heißt, wird an ihr deutlich, daß Sprache nicht bloß eine offene Struktur aus Benennungen und Aussagen, indikativen Akten und ihren Modifikationen, Bejahungen und Bestreitungen, sondern zunächst – und deshalb, wenn auch noch so unmerklich, durchweg – eine Erfahrung mit dem Sprachlos- und Weltlossein, der Aphasie und der Aphanisis ist. Die Klage, und mit ihr die Sprache insgesamt, ist *Mutation*: Bewegung mit ihrem Verstummen. Da es dieses Verstummen ist, in dem sie sich teilt und Anderem mitteilt, ist sie *Kom-mutation* vor und noch in jeder Kommunikation.

Die Gemeinsamkeit der Sprechenden ist immer auch die Gemeinsamkeit derer, die miteinander nicht sprechen: nicht sprechen können, nicht zu sprechen brauchen, schweigen, still sind oder stumm bleiben. Wie ihre Sprache nicht ohne Pausen und Stummzonen auskommt, so ihre gemeinsame Rede und ihr Reden miteinander nicht ohne immer wieder aufs Neue auszusetzen und dem, was nicht – zumindest nicht manifest – Sprache ist, Raum zu geben. Damit ist nicht gesagt, daß Schweigen oder Stummheit in der selben oder auch nur in vergleichbarer Weise soziale Phänomene sind, wie das Reden und seine durch Pausen konturierten Segmente; sie sind es so wenig, daß auch nur minimale Ausdehnungen dieser Pausen, Schweigefermaten und Verlängerungen der Abstände zwischen den Äußerungen verschiedener Sprecher die Möglichkeit völliger Absenzen, der Sprachohnmacht und des Weltverlusts andeuten können. Selbst kohärenteste sprachliche Darstellungen, und vielleicht gerade sie, können als Mauern um ein Ungesagtes dastehen, von dem sich nicht bestimmen läßt, ob es zum bedeutsamen Schweigen oder zur bedeutungslosen Stummheit gehört. Die für jede Kommunikation konstitutiven Pausen bewegen sich auf der Schwelle zwischen mitteilender Rede – denn sie sind deutbar als Ironie, als Zweifelsbekundung oder auch als Klage – und einer Mitteilungslosigkeit, in der nicht mit Anderen und nicht für Andere geschwiegen wird, da es in ihr kein Verhältnis zu Anderen, sondern nur ein solches zu anderem als Anderem, zu Un-Anderem und seiner Stummheit, ein Verhältnis zum Verhältnisunfähigen gibt. Auf dieser Schwelle bewegt sich die Klage, wenn sie Klage darüber ist, kein Gehör zu finden, keinen Adressaten erreichen zu können, keine mit Anderen gemeinsame Sprache sprechen und deshalb weder zum Schweigen noch zur Mitteilung fähig zu sein.

Eine Bemerkung von Hegel über die Verbindung von Klage und Gesang legt nahe, dass Musik in ihrer Emphase und ihrer Expressivität über die Sprache hinausreicht und damit jede Bestimmung hinter sich lässt, durch die sie auf den Bereich der Endlichkeit eingeschränkt werden könnte. Sie ist die insistente Verunendlichung der Erfahrung der Endlichkeit. Wenn es sich aber so verhält, dann hat die Klage nicht einfach eine soziale Dimension, als wäre sie in ein überschaubares, regulierbares und regulierendes gesellschaftliches Geflecht eingelassen, bloßer Faden in einem sichernden sozialen Nexus. Wenn die Klage eine irreduzible Möglichkeit – im Sinn eines unauflöslichen strukturellen Zugs – jeder Sprache ist, dann ist selbst in der Sprache der Mitteilung immer auch etwas Gemeinschaftsunfähiges, Undialogisches und Sprachloses am Werk, das die gesellschaftlichen Verbindungen auflöst, ihr Gewebe entwirkt, ihre Fasern zerstört. Die Klage vereinsamt bis zu dem verschwindend kleinen Punkt, an dem sie nicht mehr als eine gezählt und keiner zweiten und dritten an die Seite gestellt werden kann. Sie ist infra-singulär und über-allgemein, kategorial nicht faßbar, eine Sprache nicht der Bestimmung, sondern der Bestimmungs-, der Zweck-, der Absichts- und *a limine* auch der Stimmlosigkeit. Daß sie in Gesprächen und immer wieder auch in Chören verlautet, mag darauf hindeuten, daß Gemeinschaften zunächst und vor allem über ihren eigenen Zerfall klagen und sich in dieser Klage restituieren; es mag aber auch darauf deuten, daß in ihren Klagen – wie denen der Gespräche des Hiob und der Chöre der Tragödie – eine Sprache noch *vor* jeder Gemeinschaft, *vor* jedem gesellschaftlichen oder gar politischen Idiom und *vor* jeder begrifflichen Allgemeinheit sich anbahnt und als Anbahnung einer *anderen* Sprache jeder bekannten entgegentritt.

Das greift auch die Form an. Dem Schmerz lässt sich nicht einfach eine Form geben, weil jede Form ihrerseits Schmerz auslösen und jede vom Schmerz zerbrochen werden kann. Was wäre Form, wenn sie nicht vom Schmerz zerrissen werden könnte, was Schmerz, wenn er nicht jede Form verzerrte? Die Bewegung des Schmerzes, die Formen immer wieder fordert und sie immer wieder zerstört, höhlt jede Form, jeden Ritus und jedes Verhaltensschema, das ihn bannen soll, aus und bringt sie zum Kollaps. Wiederum ist die Erinnerung an Hegel in diesem Zusammenhang instruktiv, weil seine Philosophie eine Philosophie des Christentums und, genauer, der Christlichkeit des Christentums zu sein beansprucht, das von ihm als Religion des Schmerzes und der *Aufhebung* des Schmerzes gedacht wird: des Schmerzes der Endlichkeit, der, als solcher empfunden und in der ihm gemäßen Form artikuliert, auch schon modifiziert, relativiert und gestillt sein soll. Die christliche Tradition, die in den einschlägigen Äußerungen von Hegel kulminiert, ist eine Tradition der Vergesellschaftung, der Universalisierung und Spiritualisierung, damit

in eins aber auch der Verleugnung des Schmerzes. Als *Schmerz des Negativen* begriffen, ist er immer auch die *Arbeit des Negativen*, als diese Arbeit ist er produktiv, als produktiver Schmerz nur derjenige, der sein Zerstörungswerk als Werk der Verwandlung in immer neue Gestalten des Geistes und schließlich in die eine, äußerste, sich selbst enthaltende Gestalt des absoluten Geistes und damit in die Form aller Formen betreibt. Diese, die absolute Idee, müsste als der Schmerz *selbst* zugleich seine Stillung, sie müsste der Schmerz als aufgehobener, bewahrter, von sich abgerückter und beruhigter sein. Doch der in diesem Sinn aufgehobene, der begriffene und vergeistigte Schmerz – Hegel hat recht – ist keiner mehr. Er mag zwar *als* Schmerz gestillt sein, aber der ungestillte Schmerz liegt eben darin, dass er nicht *als solcher*, nicht als möglicher Gegenstand eines Begriffs, nicht als produktiver und Gestalten erzeugender sein Zerstörungswerk tut, sondern als derjenige, der außer allem Begriff und deshalb diesseits aller Gestaltung und jeder Vergeistigung wirkt. Er ist der immer unbegreifliche, der schlechthin geist- und sinnlose, formunfähige Schmerz. Er ist aber nicht nur ohne *Sinn* und keiner Teleologie unterworfen, er ist auch derjenige, der die *Sinne* angreift, sie paralyisiert und ihrer Orientierungsfunktion beraubt. „Von Sinnen“ ist jemand, der vom Schmerz „überwältigt“ oder derart von ihm „benommen“ ist, dass der gesamte Bereich der Sinnlichkeit auf diesen Schmerz konzentriert, von ihm absorbiert und in ihn zusammengerissen ist. Schmerz ist schiere Sinnlichkeit, und darum auch schon keine mehr, die sich eingrenzen, einer Bestimmung oder Form zuführen ließe.

Wenn es eine dem Schmerz „gemäße“ Form gäbe, dann könnte sie nur eine solche sein, die sich aus dem Schmerz selbst ergibt. In ihr müsste der Schmerz fortwirken und seine Formung durch jede Instanz, die von ihm verschieden wäre, zerfallen. Selbst Pathosformeln, wie sie von der rationalistischen Psychologie und Physiognomik klassifiziert worden sind, zeigen deshalb nicht so sehr Formen als vielmehr deren Verzerrungen, Formellipsen und -hyperbeln, Deformationen und Formungskollapse. Für den Schmerz gibt es kein Maß, keinen Standard und keine Grenze – er hat keine Dimension –, die es erlauben könnte, ihn in eine integrale Gestalt zu fassen, ihn „aufzuheben“ und durch Neutralisierung erträglich zu machen. Es ist deshalb mehr als zweifelhaft, ob Gemälde wie Grünewalds Kreuzigung oder Holbeins toter Christus im Grab als christliche Gemälde im Sinne von Hegels Bestimmung der Christlichkeit gesehen werden können. In diese pikturalen Klagen ist von der äußersten Grenze der Formkonventionen das Formlose eingezogen, Formbrüche – grelle Disharmonien des Inkarnats, Exzess oder Rückzug von kompositorischen Gesten, dramatische Starre noch des Haltlosen – durchschlagen die Schmerzabwehr, die nur von der Gestaltung gesichert werden könnte, und machen das Bild im einen Fall explosiv, im anderen mürbe, in seinen Verunstaltungen ver-

fällt mit dem Dargestellten zugleich die Darstellung der Dekomposition. Das Nicht-Malen ist mitgemalt, das Sprachlose spricht mit. Daher der traumatische Hyper-Realismus dieser klagenden Bilder. Wenn es in ihnen dennoch eine „Aufhebung,“ eine Bewahrung und Neutralisierung des Schmerzes gibt, dann allein in der Klaglosigkeit, mit der sie hinter jedes bestimmte Maß der Klage zurück- und über jedes hinausstehen. Denn wenn der Schmerz und die Klage über alle Maße hinausgehen, dann auch über sich „selbst,“ dann mithin so, dass in jeder Klage ein Klagloses mitspricht, in jedem Pathos die Apathie, in jedem Schmerz das Unvermögen, ihn zu erleiden. Das Medium ihrer Mitteilung ist nicht ein Mittleres, es ist das Unvermittelbare, Maßlose, das die Sprache und mit ihr alle Maße verschlägt.

### 3 Klage keine Negation

Jede Klage kann als eine Bitte oder sogar ein Gebet um Hilfe, zumindest um Antwort, verstanden werden. Doch das Verhältnis zur Hilfe ist wie alle Verhältnisse der Klage paradox. Indem sie den gesamten Bereich des Ansprechbaren, Denkbaren und Bedeutbaren angreift, räumt die Klage die Welt leer, sie macht *tabula rasa* und kann damit kein Ende finden bei dem, was – wie noch jede *tabula* – der Welt und allen noch möglichen Welten angehört. Weil sie nur Gegenstand des Klagens werden könnte, kann auch von einer künftigen Welt keine Antwort auf Klagen erwartet werden. Wenn also die Klage eine Bitte um Antwort ist, dann nur eine solche, die jede Antwort zurückweist; dann eine solche, die sich selbst revoziert. Klage heißt: End-losigkeit der Klage; End-losigkeit heißt: Auflösung jeder Grenze, die der Klage Einhalt gebieten könnte; Haltlosigkeit der Klage heißt: sie bringt sich in jeder ihrer Bewegungen vor das Nichts. Der Gestus der Klage ist also nur unzureichend beschrieben, wenn sie als Abweisung alles dessen charakterisiert wird, was ihr als Gegenstand oder Gegenrede, als Antwort oder als Widerstand begegnet. Sie richtet sich auch noch gegen sich selbst und ist als Klage gegen das Klagen immer zugleich ein Widerstand gegen sich und ihre Selbst- und Weltverwerfung. Sie klagt über die Abweisung, die sie selber betreibt; sie forciert sie und fortifiziert sich als Widerstand gegen sie. Sie ist, in allen ihren Modalitäten, ein Auto-Apotrop.

Klagen ist also durch einen doppelten Gestus charakterisiert: Es weist ein Nicht auf und weist es zurück. Die Klage ist die erste sprachliche Form – die Form der Ablösung von jeder Form –, die hervorkommen lässt, was Nicht und was Nichts heißt; vor ihr gibt es keins, ohne sie gäbe es keins. Die Klage über das, was *nicht* ist, *nicht* zureichend, *nicht* ganz und *nicht* wirklich ist, bringt



dieses Nicht und dies Nichts allererst heraus. Sie hat, das ist ihre jeweils neueste Botschaft, nichts Gutes zu vermelden, nichts Neues zu berichten, nichts Brauchbares zu sagen; sie ist die Botin dessen, was versagt, die Sprache von dem, was nichts oder nicht genug sagt. Sie negiert nicht, theoretisch thematisierend, einen Sachverhalt, der schon vor ihr gegeben wäre – kein Nichts ist „objektiv“ gegeben und keines ein Sachverhalt –, sie führt ihn erst herbei und macht seine Nichtigkeit durch deren Beklagung offenbar. Sie, die Klage, und nicht erst die logische Negation, in der sie formalisiert und zugleich eingeschränkt ist, ist die Bewegung – die Sprachbewegung, aber auch die Emotion –, die den Weg zum Nichts bahnt und somit eine der Bewegungen, die das erste aller philosophischen Probleme, das fundamental-ontologische Problem schlechthin eröffnen. Es liegt nicht in der *creatio ex nihilo*, sondern der *creatio nihili*. Es bleibt auch in der Klage im strengen Wortsinn Problem, denn sie eröffnet das Nichts der Welt, von der sie redet, allein in der Weise, dass sie gegen es redet. Wer klagt, weist ein Nichts an der Welt oder das Nichts der Welt auf, und zugleich weist er es mit seiner Klage ab. Dieser Doppelgestus von Aufweisung und Abweisung macht die Klage zu einer unauflöslichen Komplexion aus *creatio* und *decreatio nihili*. Erst mit ihr öffnet sich der zweideutige Weg zur Schöpfung dessen, wovon es heißt, dass es „ist.“

Die Klage vernichtet nicht, was vor ihr bereits gegeben oder in ihrer Zukunft absehbar ist; sie *nichtet* vielmehr in dem Sinn, daß sie ein Abwesendes, Ausbleibendes und Mangelndes allererst freilegt, in dem weiteren Sinn, daß sie es als Abwesendes abweist, und in dem dritten Sinn, daß sie es in seiner Abweisung erhält. Sie ist, in allen drei Bedeutungen, keine bloße Konstatierung, aber auch keine Negation, sondern das Geschehnis der Offenlegung eines Fehls oder einer Verfehlung, einer Schädigung oder schlicht eines Nicht-Gegebenen, und ist *als* diese Offenlegung die Bejahung – und zwar die erste Bejahung – dessen, was zwar nicht „an sich,“ wohl aber *ihr* fehlt. Ihr Nicht ist die Affirmation eines Nicht. In dieser Affirmation erst, so verhohlen oder auch stumm sie bleiben mag, wird es möglicher Gegenstand der Intention, dieses Nicht, diese Verweigerung eines Etwas, wegzuschaffen und es zu vernichten. Ihre Aufweisung geht dennoch nicht der Abweisung des Nicht voraus, denn allein als Abgewiesenes oder Abzuweisendes wird es entdeckt: entdeckt in seiner Abweisbarkeit. Sofern damit zugleich auch die Klage selbst als mangelhaft entdeckt wird, erstreckt sie sich, sobald sie sich meldet, wie immer auch inexplizit, auf ihr eigenes Geschehen, und zwar wiederum in der doppelten Wendung eines Nicht zu ihrem Nicht. Sie ist deshalb stets Nichten eines Nichtens, seine erste Bejahung mitsamt der Abweisung des in ihr Bejahten: ein Ja zu einem Nein, das in jenem Ja als ein zu Verneinendes entdeckt wird.

Damit ist aber deutlich, daß die Klage mächtiger ist als jedes Nichts, das von ihr freigelegt wird, daß sie der Spielraum des Nichts und seiner Abweisung

ist, und daß sie dieser Spielraum auch bleibt, wenn sie sich als defizienter Spielraum erweist und sich als solchen zurückweist. Ihre Mächtigkeit liegt also nicht darin, daß die Klage Macht hätte, das von ihr aufgedeckte Nichts zu erfassen und begrifflich oder affektiv zu begrenzen, sie ist ihm vielmehr ausgeliefert als demjenigen, von dem sie selbst mitkonstituiert wird. Die Klage über die Ohnmacht des Klagens gehört zur Struktur der Klage nicht weniger als zur Serie der Klageanlässe. „Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn ...“, so beklagt jede Klage ihre mangelnde Reichweite, das Fehlen ihres Adressaten, das Ausbleiben einer Antwort, die ihr entsprechen, die Abwesenheit einer Sprache, in der sie sich äußern könnte. Mächtiger als das Nichts, das sie aufdeckt, ist die Klage demnach nicht vermöge einer ihr eigenen Macht, sondern allein als Aufweisung ihrer Ohnmacht. Sie ist Macht allein des *Zulassens* der Ohnmacht, der Hingabe an sie und der Freigabe, die sie dem Nichts noch in ihr selbst gewährt. So zerstörerisch Klagen wirken mögen, sie sind zunächst Gewahrungen und Zulassungen dessen, was als unzerstörbare Vakanz, als Abwesenheit jeglicher Wirkmöglichkeit und Ausfall jedes Vermögens überhaupt erfahren wird. In diesem Sinn steht jede Klage *vor* dem Nichts und *in* es *hinaus*. Sie ist in sich selbst Transzendieren in das, was nicht ist und nie gewesen ist. Und sie ist, als dieses Übergehen, das Geschehen eben dieses Nichtseins und Nicht-Gewesenseins, Nicht-Vermögens und Nicht-Werdens.

Wenn gesagt werden muß, daß die Klage das Geschehen des Nichts ist, das sie gewahrt, das sie abwehrt und in seiner Abgewehrtheit erhält, dann muß damit zugleich gesagt sein, daß sie – als dieses Geschehen – ein Nicht-Nichts ist. Ein Nicht zum Nichts ist die Klage also nicht im Sinn der logischen Negation, die ein vorausgesetztes Nichts verneint und sich dadurch in einen Selbstwiderspruch verfängt, und nicht im Sinn einer logischen Limitation, die das vorausgesetzte Nichts dadurch einschränkt, daß sie ihm bestimmte Prädikate abspricht und urteilt, es sei, zum Beispiel, *nicht* denkbar, *nicht* produktiv oder *nicht* Alles. Diese Negation eines bestimmten Prädikats des Nichts bestimmt das logische Subjekt in jeweils einem einzigen Punkt – der Nicht-Denkbarkeit, Nicht-Produktivität oder der Nicht-Allheit –, läßt es aber in seiner Relation zu der Unendlichkeit anderer Prädikate unbestimmt. Obgleich dieses limitative Urteil auf seine unendliche Fortsetzung angewiesen ist – und deshalb als „unendliches Urteil“ charakterisiert wird –, ist in dem jeweils einzigen Punkt, den es durch seine Negation als ein Nicht-Nichts bezeichnet, zwar keine positive Bestimmung, wohl aber die Bestimmung zur Bestimmbarkeit gewonnen: dieses Nicht-Nichts hat sich damit als ein bestimmbares Etwas und somit als ein Seiendes erwiesen, das durch weitere, wenngleich unendlich viele, Bestimmungen prinzipiell seiner logischen Determination zugeführt werden kann.

Hermann Cohen, dem die Wiederentdeckung des unendlichen Urteils im Anschluß an Kant und im Widerspruch zu Hegel zu verdanken ist, hat es als „Urteil des Ursprungs“ an den Anfang seiner *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* gesetzt, weil es der Ursprung der rein logischen Bestimmbarkeit von Gegenständen überhaupt ist (*LRE*; *Werke* 6, 84–89). An dieser Logik des Nicht-Nichts ist Gershom Scholems bedeutende Abhandlung „Über Klage und Klagelied“ (*Klage*) orientiert, an diese Logik schließt der Grundriß von Rosenzweigs *Stern der Erlösung* an (Rosenzweig 1988 [1921], 25–36), aus ihr sind, transformiert aus einer Logik in eine Historik des Ursprungs, bedeutende Teile der sprach- und geschichtsphilosophischen Konzeptionen von Benjamin hervorgegangen. Ohne auf sie an dieser Stelle näher einzugehen, kann insbesondere zu der Logik des Ursprungs, wie Cohen sie darlegt und Rosenzweig sie am Anfang des *Sterns* weiterentwickelt, gesagt werden, dass sie aus dem Nichts eine Voraussetzung macht, diese Voraussetzung als negierbar ansetzt und diese negierbare Voraussetzung als ein Operationsmittel zur Erzeugung eines Nicht-Nichts und somit eines Etwas gebraucht. Nicht nur ist also dieses Nichts ein bloß logisches, es ist als logische Erkenntnisvoraussetzung gar kein Nichts, sondern nur das Instrument zur Erzeugung eines Etwas. Cohen spricht deshalb ausdrücklich von einem „methodischen“ Rückgriff (*LRE*; *Werke* 6, 92 ff.) auf die *creatio ab nihilo*, Rosenzweig von einer unverzichtbaren „Voraussetzung“ für das Wissen vom göttlichen unendlichen Sein, Benjamin in seinem „Theologisch-politisches Fragment“ vom „Nihilismus als Methode“ (*GS*2.1, 204). Scholem gelangt in seiner Studie zu dem Schluß, die Klage sei „die Sprache der Vernichtung“ und führe an ihrer äußersten Grenze die Offenbarung Gottes herbei (*Klage*, 129). Wo aber das Nichts als Mittel zur Konstruktion oder zur Erreichung eines Etwas eingesetzt wird, ist es nicht nur kein Nichts, sondern bereits dessen unter seinem Gegenbegriff verdeckte Abwehr. Eben diese Abwehr wird jedoch in der Logik des Ursprungs nicht eigens als Abwehr bedacht, ebenso wenig wird die Instrumentalisierung und Methodologisierung, ebenso wenig die Desaffizierung des Nichts bedacht. Zur Gänze verfehlt wird in dieser logischen Konstruktion aber der Geschehnischarakter der Eröffnung und Bejahung des Nichts. Da das Nichts innerhalb der Logik überdies nur einen zweideutigen Status einnehmen kann, sofern es zum einen Nichts, zum anderen ein Benanntes und mithin Nichtnichts ist, bleibt auch die Rede von der Unendlichkeit des Fortschritts in der Bestimmung dieses Nichts zweideutig und höhlt unvermerkt zudem noch den Gedanken der Unendlichkeit Gottes und seiner Offenbarung aus: auch diese Unendlichkeit muß, statt Saturation einer Leere zu sein, von eben dieser Leere durchquert gedacht werden. Sein, wie es auf dem undichten Grund der logischen Limitation eines logischen Nichts gedacht wird, kann nur gesetztes, gegenständliches, in differenziellen Graden zu vorgesetzten Zwe-

cken progredierendes, unvollkommenes Seiendes sein. Es kann nur den „Gegenstand“ der Klage bezeichnen, nicht aber deren Anfang und nicht deren Geschehen.

So sprachlich sie ist, so ist die Klage doch nicht „logisch.“ Sie spricht nicht in Aussagen und läßt sich nicht ohne Verlust ihres Klagecharakters in Aussagen übersetzen, die „positiv“ oder „negativ,“ „wahr“ oder „unwahr,“ treffend oder unzutreffend sind. Sie trifft immer, denn sie erschließt erst, was sie beklagt, und legt mit den Mängeln des von ihr Aufgewiesenen zusammen die Mängel seiner Aufweisung offen. Sie trifft jedesmal, weil sie jedesmal ein Nicht trifft und es jedesmal als von ihr unzureichend *abgewiesenes* und jedesmal als von ihr unzureichend *aufgewiesenes* trifft: sie ist immer zugleich „wahr“ und „unwahr,“ weil das einzige Kriterium für beide die Beklagbarkeit ist, von der sie sich selbst nicht ausnehmen kann. Wenn sie verwirft, dann nicht das, was ist, sondern was daran nicht ist: sie verwirft nicht im Ausgang von einem Positiven, sondern im Hinblick auf das, was an jedem Positiven und seiner Position fehlt.

Doch so unbegrenzt das Feld der Klage auch ist, es bleibt beschränkt auf das von ihr – wenngleich mangelhaft – Thematisierbare und umfaßt das Geschehen seiner Thematisierung nicht. Da kein Geschehen zum Gegenstand einer Aufweisung gemacht werden kann, ohne darüber aufzuhören, Geschehen zu sein, muß jedes Geschehen in seinem Verlauf *unaufweisbar* und *unabweisbar* bleiben. In logisch formalisierende Begriffe gefaßt: die Klage ist außerstande, die Unnegierbarkeit ihrer Negationen ihrerseits zu negieren. Diesseits jeder Setzung ist die Klage als Offenlegung eines Nichts der Welt und ihrer selbst die Bejahung ihrer eigenen Unnegierbarkeit und damit zugleich der Unnegierbarkeit ihres Geschehens. Dies also vor allem ist sie Klage: sie ist, und zwar unabweisbar, Geschehen. Wenn sie auch alles und sich selbst abweist: *daß* sie es abweist und derart abweisend geschieht, bleibt für sie unabweisbar. Es bleibt für sie aber auch *unaufweisbar*, und *unaufweisbar* bleibt für die Klage somit das, was in ihr das Geschehen der Freilegung ihres und jedes Nichts ist. Mag die Klage sich auch selbst beklagen, sie zeigt sich darin und weist sich zurück nur als Thema, während ihr das Geschehen des Klagens, ihres Auf- und Zurückweisens entgegen muß. Was der Klage strukturell entzogen bleibt, ihr eigenes Geschehen, ist aber das schlechthin Unbeklagbare.

Damit ist die Klagebewegung in ihren Grundzügen präzisiert: Ihr Transzendieren in das, was nicht im Sinn eines gegebenen Gegenstandes oder eines Vorstellungsinhaltes *ist*, kann kein vorhandener Vorgang, noch kann es durchweg es selbst und als solches sich gegenwärtig sein. Da sie auf ein Nicht hinausgeht, muß ihr Gang selbst von diesem Nicht determiniert, er muß in jedem Sinn in-determiniert sein. An der extremen Bewegung der Klage wird aber nur

deutlich, was jede Bewegung charakterisiert, denn jede muß, sofern sie Bewegung ist, auf dasjenige hinausgehen, was sie nicht ist, muß Übergang in ihr Nichtsein und kann sich als solcher Übergang schlechterdings nicht selbst gegenwärtig sein. Gerade also weil Klagen Übergehen in das ist, was nicht ist, muß es Geschehen eines Nicht-Geschehens und muß Geschehen der Nicht-Gegenwärtigung dieses Geschehens sein. Als Transzendieren in Nichts kann es nur ein Transzendieren ins Nicht-Transzendieren, es muß Transzendieren ohne Transzendenz und, als Übergang in das, was es nicht ist, Transzendieren ohne Immanenz sein. Sprachliche Bewegung, und *in extremis* die der Klage, ist, präzise gefaßt, Ad- und Atranszendieren. Erst als das Geschehen, das sich selbst nicht thematisch gegenwärtig ist, ist Klagen endlich. Von seiner Endlichkeit, seiner Selbstungegenwärtigkeit, Selbstunzugänglichkeit und Selbstunfundiertheit, kann es nur abgewandt sein, dagegen nur zugewandt der un-endlichen Wiederholung einer Selbstthematisierung, in der es sich selbst zu verfehlen nicht aufhört. Die Bewegung der Klage – und das ist die Bewegung der Eröffnung dessen, was in keiner Weise gegenständlich und in keiner gegenwärtig ist, die Eröffnungsbewegung der Sprache –, diese Klagebewegung stößt in ihr selbst auf eine unüberschreitbare Grenze, an der sie sich selbst, unaufweisbar und unnegierbar, als Geschehen entgleitet.

## 4 Klage und Antwort

Die Antwort auf die Klage kann nur deutlich machen, was sich der Klage selbst entzieht. Sie ist solange keine Antwort, wie sie sich als Gegenstand zu weiteren Klagen darbietet. Das besagt, Antwort ist sie nur dann, wenn sie nicht eine Aussage, kein Urteil und keine Erklärung darstellt, in der die Motive des Klagens, seine Auswirkungen oder Implikationen thematisiert werden, sondern nur dann, wenn diese Antwort selbst den Charakter eines Geschehens hat. Dieses Geschehen kann, wenn es Antwort sein soll, nicht den Charakter einer Handlung haben, mit der die Intention verfolgt wird, auf die Klage bewußt, kontrolliert und zu bestimmten Zwecken – der Abwehr oder der Milderung – einzuwirken, denn jede Intention ist überbietbar, abweisbar und beklagbar, also keine Antwort von der Art, nach der die Klage verlangt. Antwort kann sie nur dann sein, wenn sie urteilslos und intentionslos trifft, und wenn sie die Klage dort trifft, wo sie von ihr nicht erwartet, nicht antizipiert und nicht abgewehrt werden kann. Da der Horizont der Klage jeweils eine Welt ist und diese Welt durch die Aufweisungen und Zurückweisungen eines Nichts an dem, was sie ausmacht, definiert ist, muß die Antwort nicht nur ein unabweisbares Ge-

schehen, es muß das Geschehen nicht nur einer anderen Welt, sondern eines anderen *als* einer Welt sein. Es kann also kein Geschehnis einer Überwelt, einer Hinterwelt oder, in welchem Sinn auch immer, tieferen Welt sein, das eine Antwort auf Klagen zu bieten hat. Jeder innerweltliche und jeder außer- oder überweltliche Andere kann sich nur als Thema einer Klage darbieten und muß als antwortunfähig abgewiesen werden. Wenn Scholem in seinem Klage-Traktat schreibt: „Es gibt keine Antwort auf die Klage, das heißt, es gibt nur eine: das Verstummen“ (*Klage*, 130), dann ist damit das Problem der Antwortlosigkeit der Klage zugleich erfaßt und verwischt, denn die Klage ist immer auch Klage über die Stummheit, der sie begegnet, und deshalb kann Stummheit keine Antwort auf sie sein; wenn Scholem aber fortfährt und schreibt: „Nur Einer kann auf die Klage antworten: Gott selber,“ dann ist damit übersehen, daß auch Gott noch beklagbar ist und auch dieser Eine selbst klagt und sich in seiner Klage entzweit. Keine Instanz und keine Haltung, am wenigsten die einer obersten Macht, kann eine Antwort gewähren, die nicht ihrer Insuffizienz überführt und als Nicht-Antwort abgewiesen werden könnte.

Auf eine unabweisbare Antwort kann die Klage allein in einem Geschehen stoßen, das als Geschehen der Sprache und der sprachlichen Welt deren Herkunft, als deren Herkunft zugleich aber die des Nicht oder Noch-nicht dieser Welt wäre. Die Antwort kann nur ein Anfang und Vor-Anfang der Welt sein, sie muß von dort kommen, wohin die Klage zurückführt, indem sie die Mängel der Welt, ihre Versagungen und ihr Nichtsein aufweist. Da der Klage aber entgeht, daß sie als Eröffnung jenes Nichts selber ein Geschehen und mithin ein Anfang und Vor-Anfang ist, kann nur eine solche Antwort sie treffen, die deutlich werden läßt, daß sie just dieses ihr selbst entzogene Geschehen und darin unnegierbar und unbeklagbar ist. Allein was sich in der Klage der Klage versagt, kann ihr von der Antwort eröffnet werden: daß sie dieser und sich selbst in jedem Sinne voraus ist.

Denn in der Klage spricht sich vor allem der Wunsch aus, vor sich selbst zurückzukehren. Das wird deutlich in dem hochberühmten Chorlied aus dem „Ödipus auf Kolonos“, in dem es heißt: „Nicht geboren zu sein, das geht / über alles; doch wenn man lebt, / ist das zweite, so schnell man kann, / hinzugelangen, woher man kam“ (vv. 1224–27). Und es wird deutlich in den ersten Versen, in denen sich Hiob dem Klagen überläßt. In ihnen verflucht er den Tag seiner Geburt und die Nacht seiner Empfängnis: „Ausgelöscht sei der Tag, an dem ich geboren bin, die Nacht, die sprach: Ein Mann ist empfangen [...] Ja, diese Nacht sei unfruchtbar, kein Jubel komme auf in ihr“ (3; 3, 7). Was Hiob damit fordert, ist die Revokation dieser Forderung selbst. Indem er nicht zu sein wünscht, wünscht er, diesen Wunsch nicht zu haben. Er spricht gegen sein eigenes Sprechen, er *entspricht* sein Sprechen, indem er klagt, und wirkt damit

auf die Rücknahme der Schöpfung, wirkt nicht auf eine andere, glücklichere, sondern auf keine hin. Der erste und einzige Wunsch, der die Klage antreibt, ist die Rückkehr vor die Schöpfung zu dem, was anders als eine *andere* Welt und anders als eine *Welt* wäre. Dieser Wunsch aller Wünsche: keinen Wunsch zu haben, dieser widersinnige und dennoch unbestreitbare Wunsch, der die Versagung des Wünschens erstrebt und deshalb mächtiger als jede Versagung, der nichts als Wunsch und nichts als Geschehen des Wünschens ist, da er noch vor sein eigenes manifestes Dasein zurückdrängt, dieser Wunsch ohne anderes Ziel als sein eigenes Nichtsein und Nie-Gewesensein treibt die Klage nicht bloß an, er ist als das irreduzible Geschehen des Wünschens das Geschehen der Klage selbst. Somit ist dieser eine Wunsch der einzige, der nicht Gegenstand der Klage werden kann. Während der Wunsch, einen Wunsch zu haben, nicht minder aporetisch als der nach keinem, nur Wunsch nach Dasein und Steigerung seiner selbst ist, mit diesem Dasein und seiner Steigerung aber in den Kreis einer unendlichen Klage eintritt, ist der Wunsch, nicht zu sein, in sich selbst schon anders als das, worauf er sich richtet: er ist das Ja zu dem Nichts, auf das er hinausgeht, und als Geschehen dieses Ja jeder Klage enthoben. Allein als Wunsch ohne Welt ist er aber offen für eine Antwort, die deutlich macht, daß er Wunsch, daß er als solcher ein Geschehen und daß er als Geschehen am Anfang einer Welt und noch diesem Anfang voraus ist.

Die Schöpfung ist keine Antwort auf die Klage, sie gibt den Anstoß zu ihr. Bei der Schöpfung war der Klagende mit seinem Wunsch nicht zugegen. Darauf wird Hiob durch die Antwort Jahwes auf seine Klagen aufmerksam gemacht. Diese Antwort wird nicht als Aussage über einen Sachverhalt, sie wird als Frage erteilt. Sie ist eine der ersten aus einem langen Fragenkatalog und lautet: „Wo warst du, als ich die Erde gegründet? / Sag es, wenn du Bescheid weißt“ (38.4). Damit ist nicht nur gesagt, daß Hiob nicht „Bescheid weißt“ und Jahwes Frage nicht beantworten kann, damit ist auch gesagt, daß er bei der „Gründung“ der Erde keinen Ort hatte und daß er vor dieser „Gründung“ keinen Grund hatte für seine Klagen und somit keinen für seinen Wunsch, vor die Schöpfung zurückzukehren. Damit kann aber überdies noch gesagt und zumindest angedeutet sein, daß Jahwe mit seiner Schöpfung einen Wunsch erschaffen hat, der über jede Schöpfung hinaus-, weil vor jede zurückgeht. Daß Hiobs Wunsch, nicht zu sein und nicht zu wünschen, mächtiger ist als Gottes Wunsch, eine Welt zu gründen; daß das nackte Wünschen sich von seiner Kreatürlichkeit frei macht und sich gegen alle Gründungen und Gründe zu den Ungründen wendet, das läßt es zu einem Geschehen noch diesseits der Welt von begründeten und verursachten Abläufen und also zu einem Geschehen ohne Grund und ohne grundgebenden, onto-theo-logisch gedachten Gott werden.

Die Frage, die Jahwes Antwort stellt, legt nicht nur nahe, daß Hiob keinen Grund zur Klage hat, sie deutet auch an, daß seine Klage sich von Jahwes Gründungsstat unabhängig macht, daß sie sich an Jahwe *vor* seiner Schöpfung, an einen Gott noch bevor er es wurde, daß sie sich also an niemanden und nichts wendet und von nichts und niemandem eine Antwort erbittet. Daß er bei der Schöpfung nicht zugegen war, besagt nicht bloß, daß er Geschöpf ist, es besagt überdies, daß sein Wunsch, nicht erschaffen zu sein, ihn der Schöpfung und ihren Enttäuschungen enthebt und jedes Beistandes durch eine Antwort unbedürftig macht. Deshalb ist Jahwes Antwort eine Frage und deshalb ist sie unbeantwortbar – denn es gibt keinen Ort, an dem Hiob sich vor der Schöpfung hätte aufhalten können – und erläßt, als rhetorische Frage, jede Antwort. Sie räumt ein, daß Hiob in seinen Klagen wie in seinem Wunsch, nie gewesen zu sein, von der Schöpfung und ihrem Gott und also allem Beklagbaren frei ist. Sie räumt ein, daß jener Wunsch, widersinnig und unerfüllbar wie er sein mag, ein Geschehen zwar innerhalb der Schöpfung und auf ihrem Grund, aber zugleich ein grundloses Geschehen ist, das den Horizont des Geschaffenen verläßt und keines Anhalts an ihm bedarf. Grundloses Geschehen, ist dieser Wunsch das Geschehen von Nichts, und das Leben, das von diesem Wunsch geleitet wird, ein Leben vor seinem Anfang, an der äußeren Grenze der Zeit, des Raums und der Sprache einer Welt. Es ist Leben, frei von sich selbst. Das besagt: Hiob lebt ohne Grund und somit ohne die Nötigung, zu leben. Ohne nicht zu sein, ist er – transitiv – sein Nichts. Und es besagt: Da Hiobs Klagen und Hiobs Wunsch die Klagen und der Wunsch der Welt sind, kehrt mit ihnen auch diese Welt vor ihre Schöpfung zurück und ist unabweisbares, unbeklagbares, von ihren Gründen und also von sich selbst freies Geschehen. Als Hiob dieses Implikat der Frage Jahwes und damit die Bewegung seines eigenen Wunsches verstanden hat, findet er keinen Grund mehr zu klagen.

Er hat verstanden, daß die Antwort Jahwes ihm nichts sagt, das zur Ordnung des Wissens und der Erkenntnis gehören könnte. Hiob kann darauf seinerseits nur antworten: „So habe ich denn im Unverstand geredet über Dinge, / die mir [...] unbegreiflich sind“ (42.3). Klage und Antwort beziehen sich auf einander nicht als Gegenstände der Erkenntnis, sondern als Adressaten der Lossagung von einander. Jahwe spricht Hiob von der Verantwortung für die Schöpfung frei, Hiob Jahwe von der Verantwortung für seine Leiden. Sie sagen einander nur, daß sie mit einander reden und daß dieses Miteinanderreden die Weise ist, einander aus ihrer Verbindung zu entlassen.

Die Klage ist die Lösung des Geschehens der Welt von der Welt. Die einzige triftige Antwort darauf kann nur deutlich machen, *daß* sie es ist, und kann sie nur freigeben, indem auch sie, diese Antwort, sich aus allen Begründungsver-



hältnissen löst. Sie ist die Antwort eines Schöpfers, der noch vor seine Schöpfung zurückdenkt, und sie gilt einer Klage, die den Gesetzen dieser Schöpfung nicht folgt. Die Klage und die Antwort auf sie treffen sich nicht in einer gemeinsamen Welt, sondern in dem Gedanken, daß es eine Welt nicht gibt. Sie sprechen miteinander, nicht indem sie einander erkennend entsprechen, sondern ihre und jede Sprache *entsprechen*. Wenn ein Gespräch mehr ist als die Pflege von Konventionen, dann ist es auf dem Weg zurück vor den Anfang der Sprache.

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<i>Klage</i>	Gershom Scholem. "Über Klage und Klagelied." 1917–1918. <i>Tb</i> 2 128–133.
<i>LRE</i>	Hermann Cohen. <i>Logik der reinen Erkenntnis</i> . Berlin: Cassirer, 1902. In <i>Werke</i> 6 [1997].
<i>Sprache</i>	Walter Benjamin. "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen." 1916. <i>GS</i> 2.1 140–157.
<i>Tb</i>	Gershom Scholem. <i>Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923</i> . 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.
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Ilit Ferber

# **“Incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech”: Scholem, Benjamin, and Cohen on Lament**

## **1 Scholem and Benjamin on lament and pure language**

In the commentary to his translation of Job’s lament (*Job*), Gershom Scholem considers the inherent dichotomy between lament and accusation [*Klage* and *Anklage*].<sup>1</sup> According to Scholem, an accusation is always and essentially directed at a particular object or addressee. What distinguishes lament is precisely the opposite: it is never directed at any “particular being” and is never presented before someone or something; according to its own inner laws, it can only be directed towards language itself [*die Sprache selber*] (*Job*, 321). This invariable principle of lament undergirds Scholem’s central argument in this text, namely, that contrary to accusation, lament can never receive an answer. Lament’s plaint, therefore, although formulated as a question (e.g., “Why did I not die at birth, expire as I came forth from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts to give me suck?” [Job 3:11–12, NJPS translation]), is rhetorical in nature, and can only present and re-present the same unanswerable question in an endless self-destructive and self-referential cycle.<sup>2</sup> Scholem describes this structure as an “extraordinary internal liquefaction of the poem [*Zerfließen des Gedichtes*], inextricably connected with the law of recurrence, which shows this to be lament” (*Job*, 321). What continually reappears from the depths of lament’s law of recurrence is not only the reiteration of an unanswerable question but the emphatic presentation of the very nature of unanswerability.

A similar idea is expressed in Scholem’s “On Lament and Lamentation” from 1917–1918 (*Lament*), in which he describes lament as a point of intersec-

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1 My thoughts about Scholem and Cohen began some years ago in a conversation and correspondence with Werner Hamacher, for which I am indebted. I am grateful to Paula Schwebel for her painstaking reading of the text and for her helpful suggestions; I am also thankful to Adam Lipszyc, Lina Baruch, and Omer Michaelis for their insightful remarks on the final version of this essay. The quote in the title is taken from Psalms 17:6.

2 I have discussed the difference between *Klage* and *Anklage* in detail in Ferber 2013, 172–176.

tion between mourning and language, where “in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language” (*Lament*, 316). Here again, the internal laws of lament do not permit any exchange nor any other form of external relation; rather they essentially obstruct the very possibility of a relation to anything external to it. In lament, Scholem writes, mourning can only mourn itself and language can only lament its own being. Scholem reveals lament to be a completely self-contained form, driving itself toward the radical limit of its potentially infinite capacity of self-reflexion. This characterization of lament as an *impossibility* is crucial. Scholem thereby construes lament as a linguistic form defined by its having no object, a form that precludes any possibility of having an objective relation in the first place.

In this regard Scholem writes: “What appears here is the truest anarchy, which emerges most clearly in the *impression* made by lament, in the utter inability of other things to answer lament in their language” (*Lament*, 316). This utter inability of things to answer lament in their own language guarantees that lament can never function as a communicative form of expression. Its force seems to destroy the very ground for any possibility of a dialogical relation: not only because nothing (and no one) can answer it, but also since its devastating power forecloses any possibility that there be an object of expression. In this vein Scholem repeatedly claims that lament lacks concreteness: it “is not concrete [*gegenständlich*], but annihilates the object” (*Lament*, 313); “this does not mean that lament is a completely concrete [*sachliche*] language – on the contrary, since the object [*Sache*] would here be annihilation itself” (*Lament*, 317). In its unique destructive form of existence, lament has annihilated the objects of its language and, consequently, its potential addressees. However, this utter impossibility inherent in lament is not merely devastating to everything around it; it also constitutes lament as a unique state of utter self-reflexiveness. In this way, the annihilation of its object renders lament a powerful demonstration of a reflexivity that is both inaugurated and expressed in its complete recourse to itself. It is important to note, however, that the self-reflexive movement of lament does not express a “self” in a subjective sense (it is not an “I” of any kind who is lamenting); it is, rather, the self-presentation of pure linguistic form.

Similar ideas can be found in Walter Benjamin’s work on language from the same period. To take two central examples: when famously presenting the essence of language as being non-communicative, essentially different from the bourgeois conception of language, he asks: “What does language communicate?” His answer: “All language communicates itself” (*Language*, 63–64). This argument is elaborated and deepened in Benjamin’s theory of translation, where he describes pure language as having a non-propositional structure; it

is a language that does not mean or express anything external to it, and refers to no object or content. Instead, pure language expresses only “that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished” (*SW1*, 261). This conception of a pure language, independent of anything external to it, strengthens Benjamin’s claim regarding the practice of the translator, whose task is to reveal the innermost structure of language as such: something that can never be found in a single language, but only through the exposure of the relationships among different languages, which can be revealed only when all specific forms of intention, content, and reference are liquidated. In other words, the purity of language lies in its unfastening from any form of proposition or intention.

Both Scholem’s discussion of lament and Benjamin’s characterization of pure language deeply subvert the understanding of language’s structure as signifying and communicative. Scholem’s account of lament embodies, even incarnates, what language would look like if stripped of articulation, communication, and intentionality; Benjamin portrays pure language as having no object, no speaking subject, and no addressee. Here we see figured a linguistic form that, essentially, cannot be directed at anything external to it, and therefore can never bear any content other than itself. As I have argued elsewhere, the origin of this affinity between Scholem’s and Benjamin’s characterizations of language (specifically, their confluence in the period 1917–1921) can be traced to their mutual interest in Kant’s work, which reached its peak around the same period in which the texts discussed above were written.<sup>3</sup>

Scholem and Benjamin wrote extensively about Kant’s ideas in their correspondence, and Scholem devotes some of his diary entries from that time to Kant. What is striking when looking through their notes and letters from that period is the similarity in their attitudes toward Kant, a similarity that Benjamin himself commented on: “I have never been more astonished,” he wrote to Scholem in 1918, “about the extent to which we agree on things than about what you had to say about Kant. I could literally claim it as my own” (*CWB*, 97). Two aspects of this convergence in perspective are relevant to me here: first, both thinkers confront the conspicuous absence of the linguistic component from Kant’s critical system, Scholem rethinking it in mathematical terms; second, each responds to this linguistic deficiency by using, or at least remaining deeply committed to, Kant’s own terms. In this regard, Benjamin felt that the Kantian system will never be “shaken and toppled,” as he wrote to Scholem: “no matter how great the number of Kantian minutiae that may have to

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3 See Ferber 2014.

fade away, his system's typology must last forever." Benjamin further adds that the "transformation and correction" of Kant's concept of experience "can be attained only by relating knowledge to language" (SW1, 107–108).

Each thus maintains strong ties to Kant because of a shared belief that his philosophy must be approached via an "internal" critique, a critique that, despite being at times fiercely unfavorable, nevertheless stems from a distinctive intimacy with Kant and thus embraces, even as it criticizes, his philosophical terminology and overall undertaking. Scholem and Benjamin's commitment to Kantian terminology is manifest in two crucial terms adopted from Kant: *a priori* and *pure* [reinen]. Briefly put, Kant is seeking to establish *a priori* knowledge, that is, knowledge not dependent on nor arising from experience, which would therefore be completely independent of any form of sensibility or empirical knowledge or, as Kant further defines it, "*A priori* modes of knowledge are entitled pure when there is no admixture of anything empirical" (Kant 1998, B3).<sup>4</sup> When using the adjective *pure*, Kant refers not so much to a mode of knowledge as to its faculties: reason, understanding, intuition, etc. We have, therefore, *pure reason* and *a priori* knowledge.

In discussing Scholem's and Benjamin's deep Kantian roots, however, there is another figure who plays a crucial role in the picture that I am delineating, namely, Hermann Cohen. Cohen's thought is significant here not only because of the depth of his own work on Kant, but primarily because this work can be regarded as the substratum of Scholem and Benjamin's understanding of Kant.<sup>5</sup> As is clear from their letters and diaries, the two studied Kant while reading Cohen's commentaries on the former. In 1918 Scholem writes in his diary: "In the morning I read Kant, after lunch it was a chapter from Cohen (in

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<sup>4</sup> A somewhat different formulation can be found in the A edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Any knowledge is entitled pure, if it be not mixed with anything extraneous. But knowledge is more particularly to be called absolutely pure, if no experience or sensation whatsoever be mingled with it, and if it be therefore possible completely *a priori*" (Kant 1998, A11). Kant accordingly defines the undertaking of his critique of reason. This differentiation leads Kant to his definition of the task at hand in his critique, namely, the establishment of the organon of pure reason that would contain "the principles whereby we know anything absolutely *a priori*. An organon of pure reason would be the sum-total of those principles according to which all modes of pure *a priori* knowledge can be acquired and actually brought into being ... [and] entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts might be entitled transcendental philosophy" (Kant 1998, B25/A11–12).

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent, very informative discussion of the relationship between Benjamin's and Cohen's thought on the background of their criticism of Kant, see Deuber-Mankowsky 2005, 161–190.

this way I hope to get through it gradually”); a few months later he notes, “Since the end of the semester we’ve been reading Cohen for two hours daily” (WSF, 223, 263–264). The numerous remarks about Cohen in Scholem’s diaries and letters make it abundantly clear that Scholem was very much influenced by Cohen’s interpretation of Kant, and it would be safe to say that Scholem and Benjamin’s readings of Kant in 1918 were strongly informed by Cohen’s unique interpretations of Kant, which dictated in many senses the “tone” of their understanding.<sup>6</sup>

But even though Cohen was a central philosophical figure for the early Scholem, and especially for his understanding of Kant, Scholem’s relationship to Cohen was never simple. He described the mutual disappointment he and Benjamin felt when attending some of Cohen’s lectures in Berlin and fiercely criticized Cohen’s writings on many occasions, making reference to their obscure style and abstruse structure, even going so far as to describe Cohen’s work as “a philosophical wasps’ nest [*Wespennest*]” (Scholem *Tb2*, 276).<sup>7</sup> Despite these derogatory remarks, however, Scholem felt a very intimate bond with Cohen, and on other occasions referred to him with exceptional admiration and respect. On the day following Cohen’s death, Scholem wrote: “I can’t even say how this has shuddered me. I didn’t have a direct relationship to this man, but I felt increasingly close to him ... He was after all a philosopher and had to die so that a child like me would recognize this ... I can’t express all the unclear things in my head, when I consider Cohen’s death” (Scholem *Tb II*, 166–167). In another short reflection about Cohen that Scholem wrote on the same day, he remarked that the difficult path Cohen’s work has taken “is covered by a palisade of works, which while perhaps mortal, are in their own way imperishable” (Scholem 1985, 1). There are many ways to understand what Scholem means by this “imperishable” quality of Cohen’s work. But it is beyond doubt that despite his criticism, Scholem viewed Cohen as a model of philosophical and theological rigor.

Cohen’s role in my argument is twofold: since he is distinctly the source of Scholem’s and Benjamin’s understanding of Kant, it is important to go back to Cohen’s writings on Kant so as to trace some of the important points of his

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of Scholem’s and Benjamin’s early readings of Cohen, see Ng 2012a. This recently published special issue of *MLN* is devoted to Scholem’s and Benjamin’s interest in Kant and Cohen and includes two important notes Scholem’s wrote in 1918: “On Kant” (“Über Kant”) and “Against the Metaphysical Exposition of Space” (“Gegen die metaphysische Erörterung des Raumes”). In these texts Scholem writes about his interest in mathematics and its relation to Kant’s notions of space in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Scholem attributes this expression (“vespiary”) to Benjamin (see WSF, 72, 74). See also Scholem in *Tb2*, 177, 257–258, 272.

argument regarding the major Kantian terms that I find to be central in Schollem's and Benjamin's work on language, namely, the *a priori* and *pure*.<sup>8</sup> But Cohen's importance lies not only in illuminating Scholem's and Benjamin's understanding of Kant, but more interestingly, in his own work on lament, which does not refer to Kant directly but is nonetheless deeply informed by Kantian ideas, particularly the *a priori* and *pure*.

## 2 Cohen reading Kant

From the openly critical writings, early in his career, on Kant's theory of experience, ethics, and aesthetics, to the later texts gathered in his seminal *System der Philosophie*, Cohen's philosophical project can be read as a journey in Kant's footsteps, even as it ceaseless calls Kant's authority into question. One of the consequential focal points of Cohen's thought is his rigorous analysis of Kant's conception of the relationship between knowledge and experience, specifically centered on Kant's notion of the *pure* [*Rein* or *Reinheit*]. Following Kant, Cohen analyzes and challenges the logical structure of the *a priori* and the *pure*, thus extending and developing Kant's preoccupation with the possibility of the pure forms of both knowledge and experience.<sup>9</sup> Traces of this enterprise, which pervade Cohen's writings, can be found in his trenchant interpretations of Kant in *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1871) and *Kants Begründung der Ethik* (1877), but also in his own extension of the Kantian project in *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902) and *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (1912).<sup>10</sup>

Let me focus on the two central arguments Cohen makes in reference to the Kantian *a priori* and the *pure*. The first involves Cohen's emphasis on the necessity to investigate Kant's idea of the purity of knowledge via a method that is scientific, not psychological; that is, one must use a mathematical and geometrical model of knowledge rather than conduct an exploration centering on the thinking subject. Only then, according to Cohen, can the precise meaning of Kant's *a priori* and *pure* be revealed. This argument is formulated in

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<sup>8</sup> I have elaborated on these terms in Kant and argued for their inherent presence in Schollem's and Benjamin's early work on language in Ferber 2014.

<sup>9</sup> In some of the secondary literature about Kant, the two terms "*a priori*" and the "*pure*" are presented as identical or interchangeable. I intend to show, however, that although they can be read as being similar to each other, they are not identical (see Caygill 2000, 341–342).

<sup>10</sup> For Cohen's texts, I use the following abbreviations: *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*: KTE; *Kants Begründung der Ethik*: KBE; *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*: LRE; *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*: ARG.

several of Cohen's texts. In the opening chapters of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, for instance, Cohen considers Kant's *a priori* in the context of Kant's forms of intuition, space, and time. He develops the idea that the *a priori* is a "form" inasmuch as it should be considered independent of its content and givenness in experience (*KTE*, 33–36) – that is, independent of the thinking subject. In this sense, the problem of the Kantian *a priori* should be formulated not in terms of its actual existence (or givenness), but rather, in terms of the conditions of possibility of such existence (*KTE*, 93–94).

In his discussion of Kantian ethics, Cohen re-examines these ideas in the context of the purity of the moral law. There he contends that an accurate interpretation of the Kantian *a priori* entails disassociating from an analysis of the thinking and moral subject's constitution of the world; it should be directed, rather, toward the understanding of what constitutes the pure form of thought and morality *as such*. With such an emphasis, Cohen makes a point of shifting the interpretation from an analysis of a moral or knowing subject to an investigation of the borders of the pure form of knowledge. For Cohen, then, the structure of *a priori* experience should be explored as being not only independent of empirical experience or sensibility, but also autonomous from its application to a thinking individual. In this sense, Cohen's project is a decidedly faithful continuation of the Kantian critical enterprise, in that it seeks the conditions of possibility of the *pure form* of reason, independent of the contingencies of experience and knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

The crux of Cohen's second argument regarding Kant's conception of the *pure* is his renowned discussion of the *Ursprung*. Commenting on Kant's distinction between the *a priori* and the empirical in the opening of *Critique of Pure Reason* (quoted above), Cohen remarks that it accentuates the distinction between beginning [*Anfang*] and springing forth [*Entspringen*]. Here we can see the inception of Cohen's idea of origin [*Ursprung*] as what springs forth [*Entspringt*] rather than merely begins [*Anfängt*]. The temporal understanding of *Ursprung* as beginning or genesis is transformed in Cohen's account into a logical and dynamic principle. This shift is closely related to the mathematical context of Cohen's treatment of *Ursprung* (specifically, the infinitesimals), in which there is no mere beginning point to a movement, but rather, such movement manifests itself in an infinite and continuous generation of movement from within itself (*LRE*, 36, 123).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a learned discussion of Cohen's account of the *a priori* in *KTE*, see Poma 1997, 8–15. For an account of these ideas in the context of Scholem's interest in Cohen, see Ng 2012b, 466–476.

<sup>12</sup> See Biemann's concise account in Biemann 2009, 41–42. For a more detailed discussion of Cohen's concept of origin, see Fiorato 1993, esp. 32–35, and Wiehl 2000, 63–76.



In Kant's terms, the *pure* is defined as being essentially independent of anything external to it (be it empirical data, objects, or sensibility), and fundamentally free from any form of external causality. Cohen utilizes this definition in maintaining that what is pure can only develop from within itself, spontaneously; in other words: an origin can only generate itself, being in no way dependent on empirical forms of knowledge, thinking subjects, or the laws of causality.

Kant's pure knowledge generates itself; accordingly, Cohen's theory of *Ursprung* focuses on a discussion of what can only constitute itself – otherwise, it would not be original [*Ursprünglich*] (*LRE*, 31–38). In this context, Cohen seeks to form the question of *Ursprung* in terms of the logic of pure knowledge, thereby considering *Ursprung* to be problem of an “unrestricted sovereignty of thinking.”<sup>13</sup> For him, thought must be understood as determining itself independently of any object given to it. The production process that results in thought is therefore *itself* the product, and thought is nothing other than thinking itself [*“der Gedanke ist nichts außer dem Denken”*] (*LRE*, 23, 29). This is why Cohen repeatedly insists that thought should be understood not as a representation of a given content, but rather as a constitution of the very possibility of producing content from within itself (*LRE*, 23); or in another of Cohen's formulations, the very activity of thought constitutes its content.

Therefore, for Cohen the problem of pure knowledge should not be conceived as a psychological conundrum related to consciousness, but rather as the logical problem of examining the pure conditions of thought itself. This purity of knowledge is constituted by a consolidation of the production and the product of thought, which are revealed to be one and the same thing: “the production is itself the product. The unification is [itself] the unity [*Die Erzeugung selbst ist das Erzeugnis. Die Vereinigung ist die Einheit*]” (*LRE*, 59–60).<sup>14</sup> What concerns Cohen is the understanding of the origin of the *pure*: since the *pure* cannot be dependent on anything external or prior to it, he must find an alternative that would establish what he calls the “logic of origin.” Both Kant's *pure* and Cohen's *origin* hence rest on the same principle: both constitute them-

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<sup>13</sup> See Flach 2005, 42.

<sup>14</sup> This argument recurs in *Logik des Ursprung*. I am referring especially to the following formulation: “Und die ganze unteilbare Tätigkeit des Denkens selbst ist es, welche den Inhalt bildet. Diese Einheit von Erzeugung und Erzeugnis fordert der Begriff des reinen Denkens ... *die Tätigkeit selbst ist der Inhalt* ... Hier ist nur die Logik in Frage: nur das Denken der Erkenntnis, nicht die Psychologie mit ihren Bewußtseinsvorgängen. Das Denken der Erkenntnis fordert das Denken als Einheit und nur als Einheit ... *Die Tätigkeit selbst ist der Inhalt*” (*LRE*, 59–60).

selves and are essentially independent of anything external to them.<sup>15</sup> According to Howard Caygill, one of the few instances in which Kant provides a self-sufficient definition of purity is when he equates the *pure* with the *original*. Its fundamental spontaneity is what reveals most clearly the distinction between pure and empirical apperception: for Kant, the former is “self-consciousness which, while generating the representation ‘I think’ ... cannot itself be accompanied by any further representation” (Kant 1998, B132).<sup>16</sup>

A striking reconsideration of the question of self-consciousness and the possibility to think this term without a thinking “I” occurs when Cohen considers Plato’s idea of purity in connection to logos or language rather than to pure seeing. In this context he asks: “Where, then, lies the criterion of purity? And where, accordingly, is that of true being? Or should one, in order to substantiate [the meaning of] purity, switch over to the other word-root and hear [the meaning of] purity in [its connection to] speech – that held by the soul in itself and to itself [*Wo liegt nun das Kriterium der Reinheit? Und wo demgemäß das des wahrhaften Seins? Oder soll man, um die Reinheit zu erhärten, zu deinem anderen Wortstamm übergehen und in der Rede, die die Seele in sich selbst und zu sich selbst hält, die Reinheit erlauschen?*]” (LRE, 6). Cohen’s formulation of this question is momentous with regard to justifying the possibility of thinking in conjunction with the purity of reason and linguistic purity. The second part of Cohen’s formulation of the question cited above points to a state in which the soul [*Seele*] confronts itself, in which it is purely a soul, a pure soul. That is, it constitutes itself independently of any external content or reference. Importantly, Cohen describes the purity inherent to this independence in linguistic terms: the soul has a unique linguistic form of expression that it holds “in itself” [*in sich selbst*] and “to itself” [*zu sich selbst*] – a formulation that can be understood as denoting a form of constitutive reflexivity – the only state in which the criteria of the pure can be met.<sup>17</sup> A similar structure appears when Cohen discusses the unrealizability of yearning in his analysis of the book of Psalms (to be discussed in the following section).

Cohen expatiates on Kant’s argument in the opening of *Critique of Pure Reason* via the two aforementioned focal points. First, he attempts to detach the discussion from the thinking and judging subject and to shift it toward the

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<sup>15</sup> Poma discusses the link between Kant’s *pure* and Cohen’s *origin* when she discusses whether Cohen’s use of *origin* continues Kant’s idea of the *pure* or challenges it (Poma 1997, 80, 136–137).

<sup>16</sup> See also Caygill 2000, 341–342.

<sup>17</sup> See also Benjamin’s interpretation of the linguistic nature of Plato’s theory of ideas in *OG*, 36–37.

pure form of thought and judgment as such. Second, he is preoccupied with the logic of origin rather than that of genesis and, accordingly, he investigates what constitutes the pure forms of knowledge and judgment. These two arguments, however, not only allow Cohen to revisit Kant's idea of the *pure*; they also form the basis of one of the most stimulating paths taken by Cohen when *parting ways* with Kant. It is specifically in his application of these ideas to the linguistic realm that Cohen makes a compelling, even radical shift out of the ambit of Kantian thought. (It is Benjamin who emphasizes most clearly the absence of the linguistic component from Kant's system, arguing that the condition of its true transformation is the application of the foundations of Kant's philosophy to the realm of language.)<sup>18</sup>

In Cohen's oeuvre it is hard to find works explicitly devoted to the question of language or, more specifically, to the possible application of Kant's adjective *pure* to language or the linguistic sphere. However, he does make some allusive remarks about the matter. In *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis*, for example, Cohen discusses the problem of purity [*Reinheit*] and relates it to the affinity between thought and speech, touching on issues such as form and content, language and expression, and the possibility of expressing the pure (*LRE*, 6–7, 13–15). Like Kant, Cohen argues that the givenness of content in linguistic expression endangers language's purity ("*Die Gegebenheit bedroht die Reinheit*" [*LRE*, 151]). In *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühl*, Cohen elaborates on the structure of pure poetry and the form of music in relation to harmony, rhythm, and temporality.<sup>19</sup> These comments, however, can be classified only as passing remarks on the nature of language or purity. But there is another text in which Cohen deals more concretely with the question of language and poetry, and, in my reading, with the Kantian heritage that preoccupied him. This is his 1914 essay "Die Lyrik der Psalmen."<sup>20</sup>

### 3 Cohen's "Die Lyrik der Psalmen"

Despite its Hebrew title, *Tehilim*, literally meaning praises or songs of glorification, the book of Psalms is a collection of 150 psalms comprising not only

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<sup>18</sup> See SW1, 107–108, and GS6, 52–53. Ng gives refers to Benjamin's argument by posing the crucial question of the nature of "language" in Benjamin's critique of Kant, namely, especially, its inherent relation to mathematics. She adds that "the burden of proof lies with Cohen to explain how and why, despite the apparent mathematizability of nature and history, the world could still recede from thought" (Ng 2012b, 473).

<sup>19</sup> See Cohen ARG2, ch. 5: "Die Musik."

<sup>20</sup> Hereafter *LP*.

hymns and thanksgivings but also laments and plaintive outpourings. The predominant problem with which all scholars of Psalms wrestle is how to think about the book as a whole despite the astounding divergence in the individual psalms' structure, content, and literary style. There is a long tradition of scholarly analysis of the different types of psalms, often classified according to the context in which an individual psalm appears in the book.

Hermann Gunkel famously offered a significantly novel way of approaching the problem of the psalms' diversity, namely not by examining them according to context in the book, but rather by grouping them according to what he calls the different "setting in life" [*Sitz im Leben*] of each psalm. This setting is determined, among other criteria, by the psalm's dominant common feeling, its thought and mood, and its literary style and structure. Gunkel identified six types: hymns, enthronement psalms, communal laments, royal psalms, individual complaints, and individual psalms of thanksgiving (some of the types are mixed).<sup>21</sup> For the discussion here, let me focus on the psalms of laments. Gunkel explains that no specific situation can be identified in the psalms' portrayals of mortal distress. The misfortunes are too generalized, making it impossible to recognize whether the source of suffering is sickness, misfortune, or persecution. In most cases, the images in the laments are contradictory and "do not allow themselves to be coordinated into one self-contained situation" (Gunkel 1998, 134). The laments include, according to Gunkel's analysis, two types: communal and individual laments. The communal laments are those in which the plight of the tormented people is depicted, and usually consist of a description of a great misfortune (in many cases a plague) and a petition to God to for deliverance.<sup>22</sup> The individual laments are considered to be the prominent place for the expression of individuality in the Old Testament, where the suffering individual "will lift up his hands, out of the depths of his distress, to the God who dwells on high." These laments usually depict the suffering of the poet with the purpose of inducing compassion in God on the one hand, and relieving the poet's own woe on the other hand. These laments of the individual constitute the largest group of songs in the Psalter.<sup>23</sup>

Let us return to Cohen's discussion of the psalms, and its importance for his wrestling with Kant. "Die Lyrik der Psalmen" is not to be strictly taken as a formulation of Cohen's linguistic theory, or even as a thorough consideration

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<sup>21</sup> See Gunkel 1998. In his earlier work, a somewhat different classification is found: hymns, community laments, individual thanksgiving psalms, and individual laments. See Gunkel 1967.

<sup>22</sup> Gunkel 1998, 32–33.

<sup>23</sup> Gunkel 1998, 33–34. Examples for communal laments include: Psalms 44, 74, 80, 83; examples for individual laments include Psalms 3; 5; 6; 7; 13; 17; 22; 25; 26; 28; 31; 35; 38; 39; 42–43; 54–57; 59; 61; 63; 64; 69; 70; 71; 86; 88; 102; 109; 120; 130; 140; 141; 142; 143.

of language in Kantian terms. Focused on the biblical poetry of the Psalms, it is a very specific, even specialized text, at times circumscribed in its scope. Nevertheless, Cohen's analysis of the linguistic structure of the psalms, especially in the context of his interpretation of the motif of yearning and its connection to lamentation, reveals some of his engrossing, although imperfect, intuitions about language as such, or pure language conceived in Kantian terms. Andrea Poma has already pointed out that Cohen's discussion of the psalms can be considered to be a further realization of some of the ideas he had developed two years earlier in the *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*.<sup>24</sup> The intersection between these two texts bears on my argument here because it brings Cohen's ideas about purity in the *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling* together with his conceptions of religion and language in "Die Lyrik der Psalmen": here we see Cohen applying his Kantian ideas about purity in conjunction with an analysis of the linguistic structure of the psalms. Psalms serves Cohen as a case study in that it presents a concrete expression of two important ideas in his writings on aesthetics: the purification of feeling from its content, and the delineation of yearning as essentially unrealizable.

Let us consider each of these ideas in turn. First, in the discussion of the purity of feeling in his aesthetic theory, Cohen describes the self-contained nature of purity when he writes of "the intimate resting of consciousness within itself, the remaining within itself, the withdrawal into its own active being and there finding firmness and peace, finding satisfaction in this remaining within oneself, without tending beyond, without seeking to attain some external object as content [...]. Only this autarchy can lead up to the autonomy of aesthetic consciousness, to the discovery and affirmation of the validity and novelty and its peculiarity" (ARG 1, 97).<sup>25</sup> The condition for this autonomous nature is not dependent on the production of an object (in Kantian terms), but rather, constitutes itself independently. Consciousness produces itself from itself, spontaneously, and the only relation it maintains is a self-relation. In Cohen's account here, this autarky has a unique quality of serenity: there is no desire to transcend the limits of one's own consciousness, no seeking for an external object to provide it with meaning. This self-affirmation is revealed as purity.

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<sup>24</sup> See Poma 2006, 230.

<sup>25</sup> Translated in Gigliotti 2005, 118. The original reads: "Das innere Verhalten des Bewußtseins in sich selbst, das Verharren in sich, das sich Zurückziehen auf die eigene Tätigkeit, das Ruhen und Beruhen in dieser Tätigkeit, das sich Genügen in diesem eigenen Verhalten, ohne über sich selbst hinauszugehen und hinauszustreben, um außerhalb des Eigenen der in sich beruhenden Tätigkeit einen Gegenstand als Inhalt gewinnen zu wollen, sei es für die Erkenntnis, sei es für den Willen, diese Autarkie allein kann zur Selbständigkeit des ästhetischen Bewußtseins, zur Entdeckung und zur Beglaubigung seiner Neuheit und Eigenart hinführen."

Second, this self-referential structure of pure feeling is echoed in Cohen's account of yearning [*Sehnsucht*]. Yearning is conceived by Cohen as a movement that is essentially unrealizable and impossible to fulfill, and therefore capable of producing a segregated space of pure individuality constituted within the ideal purity of feeling. Cohen traces the structure of yearning in Psalms in the contexts both of unrealizable love and of the endless depth of suffering. He writes: "Only yearning, only this suffering fills the Ego. It is in this suffering of yearning for he who knows me that the Ego is dissolved [*löst sich das Ich auf*]" (ARG2, 27).<sup>26</sup> Note that here Cohen refers to suffering, not as an empirical event or feeling, but rather as a manifestation of the internal dynamics of what can only exist in the vast chasm between desire and its essentially unattainable fulfillment. Put otherwise, when yearning is conceived as inherently unrealizable, the suffering associated with it cannot flow out of the dejected, desiring ego outwards to an external object of yearning, which is essentially unattainable. In the absence of the possibility of an object of yearning, suffering itself completely fills the ego, dissolving it completely (an independent ego cannot exist in the absence of an object given to it). The infinite deferral of the possibility of fulfilling yearning in the form of the attainment of an object, therefore, constitutes a completely self-enclosed, confined individuality (note the interesting difference between desire and yearning here: the first is conditioned by the possibility of attaining its object, the latter by the inherent impossibility of attaining it. Considered this way, yearning an objectless desire).

This dissolution of the ego in favor of the very movement of yearning itself, a movement with no object but its own dynamics, is echoed in Cohen's discussion of the psalms. The psalmist, conveying an infinite longing to God, expresses only pure longing and its anguish. God, however, remains external and inherently, cannot turn into an "object" of longing. This emphasizes the unique and paradoxical nature of human love for the divine, which induces an incorporeal, content-less intimacy that finds expression in the psalms.<sup>27</sup> In this context Daniel Weiss remarks that the psalmist's addressee remains "invisible" to the reader or listener of the psalms, since from his perspective the object of longing can and should appear as though the psalmist is talking to "nobody."<sup>28</sup> This bleak absence of an interlocutor echoes Cohen's aforementioned quote in which he perceives purity in the structure in which the soul speaks "in itself and to itself" (LRE, 6). Cohen describes here a structure of a linguistic expression that transcends its object, expressing only its own interminable internal

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<sup>26</sup> Translated in Poma 2006, 228–229.

<sup>27</sup> See also Poma 2006, 228–230.

<sup>28</sup> See Cohen 1972, 162, quoted and discussed in Weiss 2012, 154–155.

movement, in which it “can only search for its satisfaction within its own limits” (ARG2, 31).

Kant’s presence in Cohen’s consideration of Psalms, is felt not only in the characteristics of purification and yearning. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, present in what Cohen denotes as the main undertaking of his reading of Psalms, namely, the search for what he calls the *Grundmotiv*. The “fundamental motive” [*Grundmotiv*] or “fundamental power” [*Grundkraft*], as he sometimes calls it (LP, 237–238), constitutes the structure of the Psalms’ poetry and allows for its diversity to reveal itself in the form of a single unified structure. As for the aforementioned predicament that many Psalms’ scholars have dealt with, Cohen too seeks to see beyond, or perhaps below, the patent diversity of the specific poems that contradict one another in content, subject matter, expressed affects, and addressee. But instead of looking for criteria to classify of the psalms (as Gunkel, for instance, does), he attempts to reveal the similarity and kinship among the psalms according to a distinct and determinative principle, a *Grundmotiv* or *Grundkraft*: “Which psychical act, which form of movement of consciousness constitutes the unity of this lacerated heart of psalms? ... We are not looking for the lyric of the individual psalm, but for the lyrical *Grundmotiv* of all psalms ... This lyrical *Grundmotiv* is our problem” (LP, 237–238).<sup>29</sup> Cohen is not interested in interpreting the psalms’ content, their individual speakers and addressees, or the contingent suffering they seek to communicate. Their *Grundmotiv* or *Grundkraft* cannot be located in an individual song or singer; fundamentally, it cannot be found in any specific event or expression of suffering or dejection.

What Cohen is after, rather, is to penetrate every layer of contingency and subjectivity, and to reveal what constitutes them, what unites them in an infrastructure. He is after a form, the pure principle constituting and originating the lyrical language of the psalms. To use Kantian terms so as to examine the pure linguistic structure of Psalms, Cohen must separate the empirical and sensible content of each hymn to uncover their pure form. At the end of the text, Cohen reaches the peak of his discussion of what he takes to be the *Grundmotiv* of the book of Psalms – yearning [*Sehnsucht*] – and writes that only in the movement of an infinite anticipation or endless inclination that can never be achieved (a movement he sees as inherent to *Sehnsucht*) can the essential *Grundmotiv* be disclosed. In startlingly similar phrasing to the one quoted

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<sup>29</sup> “... welcher psychische Akt, welche Bewegungsform des Bewußtseins bildet die Einheit für diese Zerrissenheit des Psalmenherzens? ... Nicht die Lyrik der einzelnen Psalmen suchen wir, sondern in allen Psalmen suchen wir das lyrische Grundmotiv ... Diese lyrische Grundkraft ist unser Problem.”

above from Kant (Kant 1998, B1–2), Cohen seeks to separate the specific content from the speaking subject in each of the songs, so as to remain with the pure constitutive ground or origin of the song of the Psalms as such – the Psalms’ *pure song*.<sup>30</sup>

As an example, consider the expression of dejection and forsakenness in the following verses:

My God, my God,  
why have You abandoned me;  
why so far from delivering me  
and from my anguished roaring?

My God,  
I cry by day – You answer not;  
by night, and have no respite.  
(Psalms 22.2–3, NJPS translation)

I am shut in and do not go out.  
My eyes pine away from affliction;  
I call to You, O Lord, each day;  
I stretch out my hands to You. [...]   
As for me, I cry out to You, O Lord;  
each morning my prayer greets You.  
Why, O Lord, do You reject me,  
do You hide Your face from me?  
(Psalms 88.9–10, 14–15, NJPS translation)

The psalm’s cry receives no response, it is cried out in the wilderness in which the poet is left alone with nothing but the echo of his own outpourings. The fundamental presence of the absent answer is experienced as the complete abandonment and casting off of the soul, a complete “cutting off” of the intimacy between God and believer. To use Cohen’s understanding of the structure of longing, these verses starkly manifest the relationship between the lamen-

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**30** It is important to mention, albeit briefly, an important figure lurking in the background to these ideas, namely, Hamann. In his 1748 “Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft” (Hamann 2002), Hamann identifies three forms of the “purification of reason.” The first is the purification of the partly misunderstood, partly failed attempt to free reason from its independence on tradition and belief; the second is to purify it from experience and everyday induction; and the third is the purification of the highest degree, namely, empirical purification, which is concerned with language that is “the only, first, and last organon and criterion of reason” (Hamann 2002, 208). In these three forms of purification, especially the last two, Hamann identified – more than one hundred years before Cohen, Scholem, and Benjamin – the necessity to rethink not only the idea of the “pure” in Kant, but also, and foremost, its fundamental relation to language. Benjamin refers to Hamann twice, but not to the above-cited text (see *Language*, 67, 70).



ter, begging for God's compassion, and God, who is starkly absent, turning his face away from the psalmist's plight, rejecting it.<sup>31</sup> The essential impossibility of existing in relation to an Other reveals yearning as a contentless, pure *form*. This idea echoes my aforementioned discussion of Benjamin's conception of pure language as language lacking an addressee or object of its content. To put Benjamin's understanding of pure language in Cohen's terms: pure language manifests the perpetual, incessant yearning for an unrealizable propositional, objective relationship.

## 4 Conclusion

Contemplating the intersection between Cohen, Scholem, and Benjamin within the framework of their intricate relation to Kant has far-reaching implications. The affinities among the three thinkers are grounded in a fierce criticism of Kant's philosophical project, but at the same time all three retain a surprisingly faithful commitment, almost a devotion, to the foundations of Kant's philosophical concerns and terminology. Cohen writes that an interpretation of Kant should begin with the intention of contributing to the restoration [*Wiederaufrichtung*] of Kant's authority (KTE, vi);<sup>32</sup> Benjamin asserts that philosophy's central task will be to take the present's deepest intimations and, together with its expectations of the future, "turn them into knowledge by relating them to the Kantian system" (SW1, 100); and Scholem, as he recounted to Benjamin, experienced a "conversion" to Kant and the study of his writings and had passed through the "great gateway" to Kant, which had heretofore been closed to him (LY, 135, 183).

The stark absence of language from Kant's reasoning elicits the most engrossing speculations from each of the three thinkers. In the linguistic realm, each can bring forth the implications of their criticism, together with a sense of intimate kinship with Kant, when applying Kantian preoccupations and terminology to a realm virtually absent from his philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Adapting the Kanti-

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**31** See also the following similar formulations: "Hear me" (Psalms 119.145); "Hear my voice" (Psalms 27.7; 64.2; 119.149; 130.2); "Hear my speech" (Psalms 17.6); "Examine my words" (Psalms 5.2); "Incline your ear to me" (Psalms 17.6) (quoted in Gunkel 1998, 158).

**32** Cited in Poma 1997, 13.

**33** It is important to note that when arguing for a similarity between Scholem, Benjamin, and Cohen regarding their application of Kantian categories to the linguistic realm, we are met with another congruence that is worthy of attention. All three take a biblical text as their respective points of departure. Scholem, in his 1917–1918 "On Lament and Lamentation," written as an epilogue to his translation of biblical laments from Hebrew into German; Benjamin,

an conceptual foundation to the linguistic realm confronts us, however, with a predicament that is important to resolve. A faithful use of Kantian terms in the linguistic realm would have to disassociate itself from an analysis of the thinking and speaking subject or the object that is the content of his thought; it would have to be directed, rather, toward understanding the *pure form* of thought and language as such, independent of any given content. Such an emphasis marks a shift in interpretation from an analysis of a knowing subject or known object to an investigation of the borders of the pure form of knowledge. The *a priori* structure should be explored, therefore, as being not only independent of empirical experience or sensibility, but also autonomous vis-à-vis its application to a speaking individual.

Glancing back at the intricate relationship between Kant on the one hand, and Scholem, Benjamin, and Cohen on the other, it is illuminating to revisit Cohen's conception of origin [*Ursprung*]. Cohen writes that *Ursprung* should be essentially linked to the movement of continuity and adds that "origin does not only apply to the beginning of a movement; every subsequent step must be in accordance with the same origin" [*Dieser Ursprung gilt nicht nur für den Anfang der Bewegung, sondern jeder Fortschritt derselben muß stets von neuem in demselben Ursprung entspringen*] (LRE, 123).<sup>34</sup> Benjamin summons Cohen's idea of origin when he gives his own account of the term: "Origin, although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. This term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance" (OG, 45). Although Benjamin challenges Cohen's logical understanding of origin and treats it as a historical category, he nevertheless shares with Cohen the idea that origin does not amount to a mere starting point or genesis but serves, rather, as a continual source of movement (or in Benjamin, process) that from the same origin continually generates itself anew.

To think the idea of origin back into the role Kant plays in my argument: Kant serves as the origin of Scholem's, Benjamin's, and Cohen's ideas about pure language and lament, in the distinctive sense that Cohen and Benjamin understand the meaning origin. That is, Kant is not the beginning or genesis of their ideas; nor are they birthed from Kant's "philosophical womb." His role

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in his 1916 "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," in which the first two chapters of Genesis are used to formulate a linguistic theory of "pure language"; and finally, Cohen, in his 1914 "The Lyrics of Psalms," his most complete attempt to give an account of language in Kantian terms.

<sup>34</sup> See also LRE, 119–122.

as origin is not temporal, but logical. The three accounts manifest a continued and infinite accord with their origin, regenerating its presence (as well as occasional disappearance) at every turn. To use another term used by Benjamin to describe the movement of origin: Kantian thought is the “rhythm” of their ideas of pure language.

To reiterate: for Benjamin, language would need to transcend the model of judgment, as Kant would have it. Judgment indeed marks the point in Benjamin’s argument about language as such, where pure, creative language parts ways with communicative, fallen language. In his adaptation of Kantian terms, Benjamin seeks pure language – a language free of experience, sensibility, communicative intent, and subjectivity, what Benjamin describes as a language that “has no speaker” and “communicates itself in itself” (*Language*, 63, 64). This language is the language of names, the only linguistic act in which “pure language speaks” (*Language*, 65). According to Scholem, lament is a linguistic form not directed at anyone or anything specific and therefore is posed without ever being able to receive an answer. It presents a linguistic cycle of an ever-recurring self-referential movement in which there is no content or object of reference. Lament is the only possible language that can wholly and utterly subvert the propositional structure of language, thereby revealing its innermost expressive (rather than communicative and propositional) essence.

When Cohen discusses Psalms’ Grundmotiv, he is seeking a fundamental principle grounding all of its individual poems. This principle cannot be found in any individual poem or subject matter to be found in Psalms, nor is it attainable in any object or specific event described therein. Following Kant’s formulation of purity, Cohen is seeking the interlinear form that determines all of Psalms’ poems as such, which could reveal the pure form of the Psalms. By foregrounding yearning, Cohen lays bare a structure in which the absence of an attainable object establishes the unique form of an enclosed space of self-reflexion, in which he finds a constant repeating movement of pure reflexion. The impossibility of an object of yearning or an addressee to receive the plaint, and the essential impossibility of an answer to lament, is not only an obstacle to expression; more importantly, it enables the potential of an expression of the pure form of language as such. The impossibility of lament therefore generates the unique promise of pure language.

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- CWB** Walter Benjamin. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- GS** Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 7 vols. Ed. R. Tiedemann et al. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1991.
- Job** Gershom Scholem. Translation first published here (see pp. 321–323) of Scholem’s “Hiobs Klage.” 1918. *Tb2* 544–547.
- KBE** Hermann Cohen. *Kants Begründung der Ethik*. Berlin: Dümmler, 1877. In *Werke* 2.
- Klage** Gershom Scholem. “Über Klage und Klagelied.” 1917–1918. *Tb2* 128–133. For English translation, see *Lament* below.
- KTE** Hermann Cohen. *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*. Berlin: Dümmler, 1871. In *Werke* 1.
- Lament** Gershom Scholem. Translation first published here (see pp. 313–319) of “Über Klage und Klagelied” (*Klage*, above).
- Language** Walter Benjamin. “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man.” *SW1* 62–74. Trans. by Edmond Jephcott of “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen.” 1916. *GS2* 140–157.
- LP** Hermann Cohen. “Die Lyrik der Psalmen.” 1914. *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1. Ed. Bruno Strauß. Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924. 237–261.
- LRE** Hermann Cohen. *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*. Berlin: Cassirer, 1902. In *Werke* 6.
- LY** Gershom Scholem. *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*. Ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
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- Werke** Hermann Cohen. *Werke*. Ed. Helmut Holzhey et al. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1977 ff.
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## Section Four: **Silence and Lament**



Agata Bielik-Robson

## The Unfallen Silence: *Kinah* and the Other Origin of Language

*Dies ist ein Wort, das neben den Worten einherging,  
ein Wort nach dem Bilde des Schweigens.*

– Paul Celan

In his early writings, Gershom Scholem speculates on the condition of pain as the true bedrock of meaning; he sees the origin of human language in *kinah*, Hebrew for “lamentation.” In the essay on language (“On the Language as Such and On the Language of Man”), Walter Benjamin writes that if nature could speak, it would immediately start to lament, thus suggesting a necessary connection between speech and the most direct expression of grief. In his quasi-kabbalistic reflections on the birth of the poetic idiom, Harold Bloom makes a famous pun in which *moaning* figures as the very source of *meaning* (Bloom 1979, 1). Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics*, postulates individual suffering as the Archimedean point of every meaningful critical theory, which, having a solid anchor in the Real of Pain, would not express itself in mere “flat voices.” And, last but not least, Freud maintains that meaning, which emerges out of the “talking cure,” appears as a byproduct of a personal working-through with its roots in the original trauma.

What this constellation of thinkers has in common is their belief in the *other* origin of language. And not just the other origin: they also tend to believe that language that rises out of lament has a different function to fulfill than simply that of communication. Its proper role is *to name the singular trauma*: not to talk it away in a therapeutic manner, nor to explain it away in a theodicy of general concepts, but to name it and safeguard its original uniqueness. The majority of thinkers in the philosophical tradition, originating in Greece, perceive meaningful speech as arising from the act of contemplation – less affectively tinged, and more objective – whose natural ideal is a transparent correspondence between language and the world: *adequatio rei et intellectus*. The belief that speech emerges out of pain and that, in Scholem’s view, lament is the first manifestation of language is as un-Greek as it gets, for this makes the meaningful expression dependent precisely on the subjective *affect*, without which there would be no *effect*: no speech at all. In this other tradition, language is conceived as a dialectical result of an expressive effort circling around the traumatic core whose initial element is silence: being unsayable, dark, and mysterious, it must nonetheless be spoken out. When language is born out of



the most subjective and most individual traumatic affect, the I, the lamenting singular subject, cannot be so easily sacrificed and eliminated for the sake of the objective and disaffected whole.

In fact, both languages, which we may here tentatively call *logos* and *kinah*, grow out of the matrix of silence, but it is precisely the *difference in silence* that makes them so disparate. In his essay on Paul Celan, “The Second of Inversion,” Werner Hamacher claims that the basic mechanism that constitutes language as such is the *inversion*: a universal figure of chiasm through which nonbeing is transformed into being, lost reality becomes found reality, and silence yields to speech. Language, therefore, repairs broken experience: precisely as Hegel saw it, language saves the elusive world of fleeting images via the solidity of the concept. Disappearing reality, which cannot be grasped at the level of sensual experience and constantly slides into nothingness, is made permanent only in the edifice of *logos*.

Hamacher perceives the Hegelian inversion through the lenses of Maurice Blanchot, for whom the condition of language as such is inescapably *tragic*: always tinged with the loss of reality and the disintegration of the world, for which the spoken word attempts to compensate (obviously, in vain).<sup>1</sup> Blanchot, for his part, seems directly inspired by Edmond Jabès and his unique linguistic conception of a *vocable*: the most basic unit of language – a term, a syllable, but also a cry, coming straight out of the Latin *vocare*. The Jabèsian crying speech, made of *vocables*, is not just a lamentation over the vanishing world; it is a sign of a creaturely condition deeply impregnated with the catastrophe of the divine *tsimtsum* which, according to Jabès’s interpretation of Isaac Luria, derailed and wounded all of created reality beyond any redemption.<sup>2</sup>

These thinkers – Jabès, Blanchot, and Hamacher – share a belief in another language that would not just try to compensate and repair the broken whole of being, but would *invert it in a different manner*, without the effect of the full erasure of the original tragic trauma and its matrix of silence. In *L’écriture du désastre*, an experimental essay in traumatic writing, Blanchot, once again influenced by Jabès, makes silence a necessary moment of language, paradoxically present in the muteness accompanying every word: “Le silence est peut-être un mot, un mot paradoxal, le mutisme du mot” (Blanchot 1986, 149):

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1 To illustrate this Hegelian principle, Blanchot quotes Todorov: “Diachronically, one could not conceive of the origin of language without positing first off the absence of objects” (Blanchot 1986, 111).

2 For Jabès, writing as such “extends around the cry” and the act of writing itself becomes a “recognition of the cry” (Jabès 1963, 14).

Silence is perhaps a word, a paradoxical word, the silence of the word *silence*, yet surely we feel that it is linked to the cry, the voiceless cry, which breaks with all utterances, which is addressed to no one and which no one receives, the cry that lapses and decries [...] The patience of the cry: it does not simply come to a halt, reduced to nonsense, yet it does remain outside of sense – a meaning infinitely suspended, decried, decipherable-indecipherable. (Blanchot 1986, 51)

Blanchot dubs this new language a *writing of the disaster* and finds its most convincing execution in the poetry of Jabès and Celan. A few years later Hamacher will confirm this finding and characterize Celan's idiom, with a further permutation of Blanchot's pun, as *ein mutierter Mutismus*: "A song exists only as a mutated silence" (Hamacher 2000, 46).

There are two crucial components of this new linguistic configuration: silence as an ever-present matrix of speech, which never goes away and lends itself as a canvas for its mutations in the form of words; and the voiceless cry, which testifies to the original trauma of loss and as a suspension of meaning constitutes the linguistic state of exception. Both Blanchot and Hamacher are late Hegelians (while Jabès is a late Lurianist, which may amount to the same thing), and we are immediately reminded here of Hegel's famous quote from his Jena writings, recently popularized by Giorgio Agamben: "Language is born out of the cry of the dying animal" (Agamben 1999, 88). Death, loss, pain, tragic trauma form the bedrock of negativity from which speech arises.

The only issue now lies in the possible bifurcation of this linguistic genesis, which can give rise both to *language as reparation*, creating a compensatory plethora of meaning, and *language as traumatic memory*, forever suspending the arrival of sense. We shall soon see that this duality, inherent in the genetic moment of language, is also the main theme of Scholem's reflections on the Hebrew genre of lamentation, *kinah*, which he perceives precisely as preserving the traumatic moment of its origin (a cry of pain) and hence suspending the advent of meaning that would ultimately explain, comprehend, reconcile, and appease. By combining Blanchot's and Hamacher's remarks on the possibility of the other speech with Scholem's analysis of Jewish lamentation, we can thus call this other language simply *kinah* – and oppose it to the *logos* as an emblem of the reparatory function of speech.

*Logos* grows out of the silence that denegates and represses the trauma – whereas *kinah* grows out of the silence that is speechlessly pregnant with a sense of protest and an irreparable loss. *Logos* protects itself against its traumatic origins by producing a plethora of meaning that immediately repairs the broken world – while *kinah*, maintaining in its texture the "cry of the dying animal," delays the moment of sense-bestowing (as Husserl used to call it: *Sinngebung*) and is more faithful to its tragic-traumatic beginnings. *Logos* is

thus reparative in the manner that was praised by Jean-François Lyotard in his passionate critique of Levinas and the whole Jewish “psychotic paradigm” (Lyotard 1989): it inverts the crisis of the loss of the world and natural connectedness with the ontological totality, as experienced by the singular, separated I, into an impersonal cognitive system that obliterates the trauma of separation and builds a second totality, made of an interconnected web of general concepts. *Kinah*, on the other hand, avoids the therapy of denegation by sticking close to the trauma that is being spoken out without being talked away: if anything, it tears open and magnifies the traumatic rift-wound that damages [*schädigt*] the whole by the emergence of the separate I – the singular subject. Whereas *logos* presents the perspective of the separate subject as lacking and hence being incapable of contemplating the Hegelian ideal of undamaged totality [*unbeschädigte Totalität*], *kinah* does the opposite: it presents the world as lacking, as impregnated with irreparable damage and loss, which then become the object of lamentation. *Logos* inverts the experience of disappearing reality into a blame put on the particular subject and her sinful separation from the whole; *kinah* preserves this experience in its original, uninverted form, keeping at least half open the gates that lead into the horror of negativity: death, destruction, suffering, the transience of all things.

This opposition, therefore, has a mediation in the common origin of its terms: *the tragic trauma of loss*, which both *logos* and *kinah* negotiate in radically different manners. Precisely in this sense does Hermann Cohen speak about the tragic hero as a middle term [*ein Mittler*], which for him delivers a common ground of comparison between Shem and Yaphet, Hebrews and Hellenes, and the visions of each of the origin of language. If Greek tragedy emerges as a fascinating topic for the whole generation of German Jews from Cohen and Lukacs through Bloch and up to Benjamin, Scholem, and Taubes, this is not only because they were steeped in the Greco-German tragic paradigm that had informed German philosophy since at least the time of Nietzsche and, before him, Schelling.” If tragedy so strongly occupies their minds, this is because of the crucial decision-point it brings to the fore: the vacillation between myth and revelation, between therapy and redemption – or, in other words, between the “false tongue” of totality-oriented *logos*, which glosses over the tragic hero’s misfortune, and the true language of lament, which arises from the ashes of the tragic speechlessness.

We could thus paraphrase Benjamin’s dictum on the muteness of nature and say: *If the tragic hero could speak, he would immediately begin to lament* (see SW1, 72). This paraphrase is not just a rhetorical defacement, but it actually makes sense: the tragic hero, having been an integral part of mythic nature, falls out of this arrangement by his unduly *Ate*, a misfortune beyond measure,

and now stands, a separated bare life, on the threshold – or rather at a cross-roads with only two possible roads to follow. Either he goes down, *geht unter*, sinking back into the mythical abyss of being (just like Oedipus in Colonus, descending straight into the earth and fading out into a rock), and lets the explanatory song of the chorus do its job, i.e., to repair the broken whole and deliver it to its *unbeschädigt*, undamaged state. Or he makes a revolutionary turn and transforms his *Ate* – the misfortune that is traumatic beyond any measure, which has the potential to explode the immanent world of myth – into a vehicle of a new, non-mythic and non-ideological language that can address the world as broken. He may thus either silently erase himself out of existence for the sake of the general *logos*, or insist on his subjective scandalous rupture and, by unleashing a lament, turn it into a beginning of new speech. For its Jewish readers, therefore, the tragic genre reveals the moment of the most fundamental decision, which must tip the fate of mankind into one of two equally possible directions: either backward into the mythic community of an unbreakable natural whole, or forward into the future messianic “distant community” of individuals who stake their lives on “breaking the wholes” [*shevirat ha-kolim*].<sup>3</sup>

## 1 The revolution of silence

This revolution of trauma or measureless misfortune, which goes hand in hand with the revolution of silence, is the main theme of Scholem’s reflections on *die Klage/kinah*, written in 1917–1918. Scholem sets the *kinah*, the lament arising from and falling back into silence, against revealed speech, but does not position this opposition along the axis of the profane and the sacred. Rather these two forms of non-articulation compete with each other on the religious plane. Revealed speech, which is “the most articulate” [*das Aussprechlichste*], is the language of God himself, who knows neither trauma nor silence: who does not need, as Celan would later say, an *argumentum ex silentio* (Celan 1999, 87).<sup>4</sup> *Kinah*, on the other hand, arises from below, from the tragic midst of

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3 While the phrase “distant community” comes from Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the quasi-Lurianic pun *shevirat ha-kolim* derives from Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*: what is significant here is that both are used in their analyses of the tragic hero.

4 And although in his *kinah* essay Scholem also talks about the “weeping God,” this “weakness” cannot be attributed to the God of revelation but only to his presence in the creaturely world, i.e., Shekhinah.

suffering creatureliness, groping in the dark for any sign of transcendence that could help her climb out of the immanent fix. Despite its apparent loquaciousness, lament is hardly a language, for it suspends the arrival of meaning, just as it delays the moment of reconciliation; it is silence disguised. It is a cry rising out of the silent traumatic matrix and falling back into it, and its strongest constitutive argument is not what it says but what it silences. For, as Schollem enigmatically stipulates, it is precisely silence that forms the unfallen dimension hidden within speech, its potential “storehouse” of meanings that reach beyond the fallen sphere of immanence. In *kinah*, speech winds itself in and commits suicide, so that silence emerges in its potentially unfallen, virginally intact state:

Solange die Unantastbarkeit des Schweigens nicht gefährdet ist, so lange werden Menschen und Dinge klagen, denn eben dies macht ja den Grund unserer Hoffnung auf Restitution des Sprache, auf Versöhnung aus: dass zwar die Sprache den Sündenfall erlitten hat, das Schweigen aber nicht (*Tb2*, 133).

[So long as the inviolability of silence is not threatened, men and things will continue to lament, and precisely this constitutes the grounds of our hope for the restitution of language, of reconciliation: for, indeed, it was language that suffered the fall into sin, not silence. (*Lament*, 319)]

The absolute originality of silence is related here to the absolute originality of God’s revealed speech; while all other languages suffer contamination by the mythic forces of the actual because of the Fall, silence retains its purity, just like the speech of revelation it tries to provoke. And this indeed is a provocation, a truly Jobean provocation, which maintains all the agonistic aspects of this paradigmatic encounter between man and his God. What makes this encounter possible at all is the fact that Job’s speech is not completely fallen, for it also contains an unfallen element that makes him equal to, or at least commensurable with, God: silence. There is a holy correspondence between his unfallen silence and the original divine *ayin*, “the nothingness of revelation” (*CSB*, 142) which can only create a link between separated immanence and transcendence. Thus, when Job (or the tragic hero) *geht unter*, his silence locates him beneath the level of all spoken languages – but also potentially above them, where “the secret curve” of silence connects with the real word. “So entspricht dem eine Offenbarung, die nicht kanonisch ist, deren Setzung Setzung der Frage ist. Und diese Offenbarung ist heilend” (*Tb*, 378: “And so it is answered by a revelation which is not canonical, for its form is the form of the question. But this is the revelation that saves”).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This agonistic confrontation between two holy forms of articulation, the silent and the “most pronounced” manifestation, finds its curious equivalent in some motifs of Marrano theology,

This already sounds very much like Benjamin, who also approached the issue of tragedy and did so at least three times: in “Fate and Character” (1919), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1921), and “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (1922). Scholem’s and Benjamin’s reflections on tragedy, mourning, and silence developed independently between 1916 and 1919, but share nonetheless an uncanny affinity. Scholem does not hide that he drew his inspiration from the sentence from Benjamin’s early essay on language, “For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable” (SW1, 74), which both will later elaborate on: Scholem in his meditations on the noncommunicable and silent dimension of lament, and Benjamin in his book on the German baroque *Trauerspiel*.<sup>6</sup> Yet they also differ as regards tragedy: whereas Scholem directly links mourning to the tragic paradigm, Benjamin severs this connection and presents the lamentary language of *Trauerspiel* as being strictly opposed to the loftiness of tragic language. As early as “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” (1916), Benjamin describes the sadness of lamentation as spontaneously dissolving into asemantic music and opposes it to the sublime non-affectivity of the tragic hero, who is firmly fixed in the belief in articulation, even if it is not yet available: “Whereas in tragedy the eternal inflexibility of the spoken word is exalted, the mourning play concentrates in itself the infinite resonance of its sound” (SW1, 61). In consequence, Benjamin will also separate the two types of silence that in Scholem’s account form a dialectical whole: the revolution of silence that occurs in Greek tragedy is emphatically not the same as the revolution of sadness that occurs (or not) in *Trauerspiel*. For though the former may indeed lead to the hope for the restitution of speech, the latter inevitably sinks into the ocean of music. Thus, in the letter of 30 March 1918, which otherwise

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which Scholem began to study in the period following his essay on *die Klage*. In Abraham Miguel Cardozo, soon to become one of Scholem’s favourite Marrano-Sabbatian sources, we can read about the opposition of two Messiahs: Ben Ephraim (or Ben Joseph) versus Ben David. The former rises from below, from the dark realm of profanity and confusion, and is surrounded by silence, which hides his unclear and inchoate aspirations for ascending; whereas the latter comes from above, knowing exactly what he wishes to achieve. Messiah Ben Ephraim-Joseph resembles a tragic hero, who breaks out of the mythic totality, silently hoping for a new language that could articulate his longings, whereas Messiah Ben David represents *das Aussperchlichste*, the revealed speech that in its purity knows no entanglement with the fallen realm of the profane. Needless to say, it is the first Messiah, born and raised in tragic-traumatic circumstances, who must die, while the second prophesies the coming of the messianic Sabbath to mark the end of the age of negativity.

<sup>6</sup> On the mutual entanglement of Benjamin and Scholem in their reflections on mourning and tragedy, see most of all Weigel 2000, as well as Barouch 2010.

praises Scholem's essay on *kinah* and thanks him for divulging the Hebrew sources of lamentation, Benjamin reproaches his friend for having not yet recognized "the opposition between mourning and tragedy" [*zwischen Trauer und Tragik*] – which, considering what Scholem has to say about the dialectics of lamentation and silence, may not be completely fair.<sup>7</sup> Following Lukacs and then Rosenzweig, who both seal the tragic hero's struggles in defiant silence, Benjamin is determined to keep tragedy and the mourning play strictly separate. But it well may be that Scholem was more right here: that is, unhindered by an anti-Nietzschean campaign of the sort that engaged Benjamin, Scholem could make more room for tragedy as recurring paradigm of transition between myth and revelation, kept alive also in the later religious tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, despite this one disagreement, analogies abound; both thinkers are equally deeply concerned with the entanglement of silence, lamentation, and speech, as well as with the surviving remnants of tragedy – as the "middle term" between myth and revelation – within the later structure of revealed religion. Thus, in his musings on Hebrew lamentation at the end of 1918, Scholem formulates practically verbatim the principle that will soon become a guiding light for Benjamin's characteristic "Gnostic" take on the tragic hero. What Scholem inscribes into the laments of Job and the last princes of Israel, Benjamin will project onto the tragic hero, namely the accusation aimed at God, against whom man feels himself to be "better" and "more just." Scholem writes:

*Who would be just before God, would be more just than God.* This state of affairs lies at the bottom of the Hebrew construction *zadak me*, "more just than": *ha-enosh me-eloah jizdak* in Job 4,17 can mean: "Is man just before God" or "Is man more just than God and purer than his Maker." An ambiguity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "In contradistinction to your point of departure, mine had only the advantage of pointing me, from the very start, to the fundamental antithesis of mourning and tragedy, which, to conclude from your essay, you have not yet recognized" (CWB, 121).

<sup>8</sup> The anti-Nietzschean thrust of the *Trauerspiel* book causes Benjamin to reject Nietzsche's "eternalization" of tragedy, which goes together with its purely aesthetic and ahistorical treatment. For Benjamin, Greek tragedy is not a universal mode of experience but a historical genre fit only for ancient Greece, certainly not for modern Europe. In this sense, Benjamin's argument, exalting the modernity of the German baroque mourning play at the expense of obsolete tragedy, goes also against the grain of Georg Lukács's "Metaphysics of Tragedy," which deplores, in a very Nietzschean way, the disappearance of the tragic from modern bourgeois life.

<sup>9</sup> "*Der vor Gott gerecht wäre, wäre gerechter als Gott.* Dieser Sachverhalt liegt der tiefen hebräischen Konstruktion *zadak me*, 'gerechter als' zugrunde: *ha-enosh me-eloah jizdak* in Hiob 4,17 kann heißen: Ist ein Mensch vor Gott gerecht oder: Ist ein Mensch gerechter als Gott und ein Mann reiner als sein Schöpfer. Doppelsinn" (*Tb*, 550). This Jobean lesson strongly influences Benjamin's eccentric interpretation of Greek tragedy in the *Trauerspiel* book, where the tragic

Still earlier, in his small essay on *kinah/Klage*, which he sent to his friend to review and impatiently awaited the reply, Scholem focuses on the possible messianic radiance of silent lamentation. And indeed, the thesis about the unfallen character of silence will soon find a curious resonance in Benjamin's investment in tragic *Schweigen*, which for him resounds with clearer messianic overtones than any explicit messianic prophecy. In Benjamin, "the speechless contest of the agon" (OG, 107) constitutes the true element of the first anti-mythic messianic struggle, "the decisive confrontation with the demonic world-order" (OG, 109). More so than prophetic speeches, tragic silence harbors in itself a pure, still, non-intentional potentiality of a future messianic word, absolutely singular, sublime, and spectral in its uncontaminated non-actuality, in its vibrant and pregnant *noch-nicht*: "Tragic silence, far more than tragic pathos, became the storehouse of an experience of the sublimity of linguistic expression" (OG, 109).

In both men's vivid interest in the theological potential of silence, the traditional Jewish iconoclasm metamorphoses into *logoclasism*: mistrust toward images is shifted into the linguistic sphere where language, in all its positivity and articulation, veils rather than divulges. But this logoclastic maneuver has yet a deeper purpose, especially in young Scholem, who in his diaries sees himself almost as the new Jewish Messiah, coming to lay the foundation for Zionism as a "messianic community of men": to remove the deceptive veils of Judaic tradition and so reach to the source of revelation itself. Hence his meditative practice: "to keep silence in Hebrew" [*in Hebräisch schweigen*]. Which means: to approach the silent origin of language where the chain of tradition breaks not in order to vanish, but to begin anew. Thus, while preparing his essay, Scholem notes in the diary on 24 March 1918:

The Zionist life must be very silent. It has to be guided by a power that, metaphysically speaking, gives the Zionist a quiet language ... The highest task of the metaphysics of language is to recognize two polarities as identical: silence as a source of language, and Revelation as the source of language. (LY, 216–217)

Yet this "identical" foundation is not without a dialectical tension, in which Silence and Revelation come into a potentially dangerous antagonism; and this

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hero is portrayed as a citizen of the messianic nowhere-land: he "throws the dumb shadow of his being, the self, as a sacrifice, while his soul finds refuge in the world of a distant community" (OG, 109). Here we also touch the very essence of the Benjaminian Tragic Gnosis, which finds a curious parallel (inspiration?) in Scholem's entry on Job: "*in tragedy pagan man realizes that he is better than his gods*, but this realization strikes him dumb, and it remains unarticulated" (OG, 110; my emphasis).



turns the whole project of the renewal of tradition into a high-risk operation, walking indeed a “thin line between nihilism and religion” (Scholem 1973, 271): between tragic despair, always prone to fall back into the world of myth, and hope in the coming (always *only* coming) word of revelation. Both Scholem and Benjamin know that the game they play with Greek tragedy is, religiously speaking, a hazardous venture. For not every tragic hero turns into Job: some simply “go under” without a trace; and not every Job, even if managing to stay afloat, is rewarded by God’s reply.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 The tragic counter-revelation

Scholem’s little essay on *die Klage* is an experiment in what we might call a creaturely theology or, even better, in Eric Santner’s ingenuous terms, a *creaturely psychotheology*, for it is worth remembering that Scholem proudly called himself a “metaphysical psychologist.”<sup>11</sup> Not strictly opposed to divine theology, though not completely non-agonistic toward it, the creaturely (psycho)theology forges its own idiom of revelation. It is a revelation that comes not from above, but arises from below, just like Cardozo’s Messiah Ben Ephraim; it avails itself not of the unfallen word but merely of the unfallen silence. As such, it constitutes a *counter-revelation*: a different knowledge of holy affairs, which complements (but perhaps also impeaches?) the Divine Word. It is a voice of the singular creature, *die Kreatur*, who strives to be heard on the wide plain of Holy History. Its weapon, its resistance to invalidation, resides in the unfallen silence: the tragic speechlessness of a creature who undergoes creaturely ordeal. *Kinah* is thus the creature’s say in theological matters, a voiceless voice-cry with its powerful reverberation of the unfallen silence that cannot get silenced, the paradoxical *unsilenceable silence* – silence on par with the most pronounced, *ausprechlichst*, Word Divine. Silence as a tragic counter-revelation, rising up to meet “revelation proper.”

On the first glance, the incipit of Job’s lament – “Perish the day that I was born” [*Untergehe der Tag da ich geboren bin*] – corresponds very closely to Oedipus’s “I wish I were never born” [*me phynai*] from Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. This correspondence is fully confirmed by Scholem’s claim that the matrix

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<sup>10</sup> On the dangers and ambiguities of playing with the *esh zara*, the “alien fire” of Greek tragedy, see above all Bielik-Robson 2013.

<sup>11</sup> “I am, as it were, a metaphysical psychologist. I can know only what I have seen, what I have beheld” (*LY*, 212; 14 March 1918). See also Santner 2001.

of silence and the lamenting speech that issues from it belong essentially to the tragic paradigm: the threshold, borderline, or transition between the symbolic world of myth and the redemptive world of revealed religion – “Die Sprache der Tragödie ist aufs *engste* mit der Klage verwandt” (*Tb*2, 129: “The language of tragedy is *most intimately* related to lament”). This is because the unchanging theme of lamentation is always the natural immanence, exploding and shaking in the rupture of sorrow that is directed against nature’s very essence, the mortal birth or, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, the trauma of birth: “Die Klage um die Geburt ist eine ewige. Sein heisst: Quell von Klage sein” (*Tb*2, 546: “Lament for the fact of being born is eternal. To be is to be the source of lament”). The lament, therefore, is a *zyklische Anklage*, a monotonous circuitous flow that imitates the hopeless cyclicity of nature, turning from womb to tomb, from the trauma of inexplicable separation to its equally mysterious cancellation in the moment of death. We could say that nature as the theme of *Klage* appears always as an inescapable “womb-tomb” (Samuel Beckett’s term), which found its paradigmatic expression in the famous nihilistic equation of Schopenhauer, *natus est denatus*: being born is the same as being dead already.

And although lamentation already rises above concreteness and begins to anticipate the universal idea of being as such, where being as totality is what is designated “the source of mourning,” it cannot yet judge. The lament “ist eine Anklage, die sich nie zum Urteil wandeln kann” (*Tb*2, 546: “is an accusation that can never turn itself into a verdict”), because it lacks the vantage point from which it could formulate a verdict; although it shakes and explodes the immanence, it is uttered merely from within. In the end, therefore, *die Klage* turns in helplessly on itself and accuses-deplores [*klagt*] speech itself (*Tb*2, 545). For why waste one’s breath in the face of so much natural violence, which does its destructive job of bringing beings into existence only to make them suffer and die; why add to this nightmarish physics of *genesis kai phtora* the layer of words that cannot change anything but only mirror the natural cycle; and why speak *out* when there is not a single creature in this fallen universe who could stick *out* from the totality of immanence and answer this lamenting call? Hence lamentation always hovers over the silence from which it hopefully rises and into which it hopelessly sinks back, uttering in the end only a “voiceless cry” that suspends all sense, all meaningful expression: “Die Sprache der Klage selbst is eben darum die Sprache der Vernichtung” (*Tb*, 129: “the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of annihilation”). “The infinite violence” [*die unendliche Gewalt*] with which *kinah* turns against itself as a linguistic practice reenacts the trauma of the destruction of the integral mythic-meaningful order: the trust formerly laid in natural totality

violently breaks down, leaving the whole natural *cosmos* in a state of senseless ruin, in an “anarchy” of isolated, purely material remainders of the disintegrated symbolic whole. But, though destroyed in its order, the natural immanence is still the only context of the lament; there is no way out of it, *not yet*.

The lament has its object, but it is strangely objectless: it is mourning [*Trauer*]. In distinction to joy, “which has its essence, *Kern*” (*Tb2*, 128), mourning cannot be objectified: “seine Gegenständlichkeit [ist] ausschliesslich symbolischer Natur” (*Tb2*, 129: “[mourning’s] concreteness possesses an exclusively symbolic nature”). Just like the Heideggerian *Angst*, which has no specific object but is a general *Stimmung* reacting to the abstract totality of being-in-the-world, the Scholemian *Trauer* is non-literal and thus merely symbolic; it connects with the whole of immanence as such. But for Scholem being a symbol indicates something more than just a lack of literal objectivity. It is also evidence of a mythic knowledge of the world as a hermetic natural totality, one that is necessarily dark, vague, fluid, and half-concealed, for it lacks an external standpoint of judgment (precisely as in the famous saying of Heraclitus from Fragment 123, *physis kryptesthai philei*, “nature likes to hide”). While the language of revelation is literality itself – *das Aussprechlichste*, reserving no recess of darkness in its all-revealing light – the mythic knowledge of immanence rests in the silence of the symbol.

The crux of Scholem’s reasoning is precisely the creation of a seemingly impossible way out – an exodus – from the self-enclosed world of immanence that is experienced through the symbolic lenses of mourning:

(The language of tragedy is *most intimately* related to lament.) Language in the state of lament annihilates itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of annihilation [*Vernichtung*] ... Thus mourning partakes in language, but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language. What appears here is the truest anarchy, which emerges most clearly in the *impression* made by lament, in the utter inability of other things to answer lament in their language. There is no answer to lament, which is to say, there is only one: falling mute [*das Verstummen*]. Here again lament shows itself to be the deep opposition of revelation, which is the linguistic form that absolutely demands an answer and enables one. One cannot even answer lament with a lament itself. For to answer lament means wanting to give mourning, which is directed only toward its own downfall, another direction. Only One can answer lament: God himself, who through revelation evoked it [i.e., lament] out of the revolution of mourning. (*Lament*, 314–316)

The “revolution of mourning,” which closely parallels the Benjaminian “crisis of death,” is yet another version of the tragic *Umkehr*, i.e., the turning point that separates the muteness of the tragic hero from the mournful expression of Job, who brings into speech his suffering “anarchy.” Thus, while mourning naturally gravitates toward self-destructive silence, the violent revolution of

mourning reorients its spontaneous tendency to fall and disperse and so drives it upwards, in the act of *Aufschwung*. It rises to meet – or rather, demand – the speech of revelation, but in a language differing radically from dialogic language, as in Rosenzweig’s model of revelation based on the loving interplay of the Song of Songs. The sacred anarchy of *kinah*, which disconnects the mourner’s bare life from the *Lebenszusammenhang* and makes him fall out of the communication of the living, poises him on the verge of the absolute break or turn [*Wende, Umkehr*]: it will either sink back into muteness, which constitutes the original element of trauma, and then seek consolation in the “false tongue” of the world of myth – or be suddenly summoned and answered by the One, the only One who *can* answer the call of mourning. It will either give in to the nostalgic desire to return to the destroyed community of nature and to recreate it in a reparatory *logos* – or it will try to provoke another solution, which would no longer look for the healing of the broken natural whole and would seek a way out.

The turn, *Ukmehrung*, or revolution is thus the borderline of the riskiest indecidability; the lamentation situates itself precisely on *die Grenze* constituting the Hölderlinian moment of the highest danger that at the same time represents a growing possibility of redemption. Here the former means a total destruction of all speech, absolute *Verstummen*, while the latter indicates – in the deepest etymological sense, for it only points to it – a birth of a true speech, where proper questions demand proper answers. This can be generated solely by God himself, the only One who can reply to the lament. As a limit concept, therefore, *kinah* mediates between two worlds – pagan and religious, mythic and revelatory – and it is precisely this borderline status that connects it so “intimately” with tragedy, which also constitutes the fluid “middle term” between these two worlds. And just like the tragedy, *kinah* does not belong strictly to either of them. For while it makes no sense to lament in the pagan world ruled by an impersonal Fate that cannot be an addressee of lamentation – in the religious world, where revelation falls prey to the “treason of tradition,<sup>12</sup> turning into a new cosmic theodicy, the lament gets banned as sheer blasphemy. By oscillating between the two from the borderline that separates them, *kinah* shifts tragic trauma into the theological world, provided for by the providential God, where tragedy as such is principally ruled out. Thanks to this shift, the tragic violence of total destruction, both of the world and the self, acquires a new meaning that it cannot have in the pagan world: God, now

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<sup>12</sup> On the common Latin root of *tradition*, *translation*, and *treason*, see above all Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, which in this respect is clearly indebted to Scholem’s “Marrano” reflections on the nature of the true tradition that must remain hidden.

stripped of all the protective veils of the traditional theodicy, presents itself as the main “enemy” and the target of *Anklage*. In the world already touched by the word of revelation, however disfigured it may become in the chain of tradition, it is at least *metaphysically* possible to raise the voice of protest.

Unlike most of the tragic heroes – who only *potentially* can break into lament, but actually *go down*, overcome by mythic forces – Job discovers the medium of *kinah*, thus realizing the revelatory potential hidden in the tragic silence, called by Benjamin “the sublime storehouse of meaning.” In Scholem’s reading, therefore, Job silences the official religious discourse of the tradition, falling into “treason” (while refusing to engage in any argument with his “friends”) to provoke a new, “non-canonical” revelation, which belongs to the “other” tradition as the transmission of the unfallen silence. Tragedy, as the paradigmatic trauma of the cosmic order’s destruction, also serves here, in this wholly new universe of monotheism, to make meaningful an experience that monotheistic tradition wished to erase as being no longer possible: that of the complete dissolution of the divine world order and a revelation of the total insufficiency of *any* theodicy which – at this very tragic moment translated into the religious universe – displays all the seemingly archaic features of the oppressive myth. Hence what traditional orthodoxy may see as blasphemous “anarchy,” a silent abstention from official religious discourse, in Scholem’s subversive vision turns into the possibility of renewing the tradition. And just as the kabbalistic ritual of the new creation becomes possible only when the old world is revoked and is reduced to the original *ayin*, there can be a renewal of tradition only through the destruction of the whole meaningful order of reality. Tragic trauma, apparently made obsolete in the monotheistic providential cosmos, has to survive as a critical means of suspicion and subversion: by exposing the monotheistic reality as nothing but yet another mythic arrangement, which glosses over the individual’s suffering, it reminds the tradition of its “betrayal” – for this is precisely the world that revelation was supposed to leave behind for good. *Kinah*, which silences the language of theodicy and attempts to arise from the tragic silence on its own, without the props of official discourses, is a necessary mark of this failure, and an immediate reaction to it.

The revolution of mourning, therefore, is the same as the revolution of silence [*Revolution des Schweigens*; *Tb2*, 128]. Being *die Sprache des Schweigens*, and barely emerging from the silent matrix – just as natural beings barely emerge from the womb-tomb of the immanent abyss – *Klage* can always turn both ways: either into the absolute opposite of revelation, the total *Verstummen* of the resigned muteness of nature, already disenchanted and deprived of its symbolic beauty (best represented by the terrible silence of Kafkan sirens); or

into revelation proper, when it demands, in Jobean fashion, to be answered by the non-immanent God, uttering a voice different than the voice of nature. As in the Hölderlinian proximity of extremes, here also do mourning and silence show a Janus-faced duplicity. *Die Klage* can either seal the mythic world in its infinite perpetuation, without *Ausgang* or *Eingang*, and then only fade out in the tragic *Untergang* – or it can expose the scandal of the mythic immanence to the extent of bursting it open, open to the word-to-come, a true word of answer and judgment belonging, as Benjamin would have it, to the always “unknown God” and the always “distant community” of the true covenant. *Die Klage*, therefore, is the deepest and the most genuine testimony of *der Zeuge des Seins*, the single creature, against whose traumas and suffering even God can only be a witness, never a final authority. “Seine Leere wird zum Lehre” (*Tb*, 132: “the word’s emptiness becomes teaching”) in both possible senses: it can either confirm the tragic view of the world without ways out, or point to the necessity of exodus from the iron cage of myth, where *Leere*, in the former idiom representing only sickness and death, turns into a positive space of separation.

*Kinah* is thus priceless as a form of creaturely testimony. Even mature monotheism must be able to preserve it despite all the dangers due to lament’s propensity to slide back into the pagan world of myth. As an irreplaceable creaturely expression, *kinah* preserves in itself the unfallen quality of silence, defending it against any “false” and “fallen” therapeutic chatter of institutional theodicy, just as Job protects his righteous silence against the prattle of his “friends.” “So entstand die hebraische Quinah” (*Tb*2, 133: “In this way, the Hebrew *kinah* arose”).

### 3 Words in the image of silence

Like Benjamin, who within the overt messianic tradition insists on safeguarding its silent secret origin rooted in the tragic “preliminary stage of prophecy,” Scholem also firmly believes that revealed religion must maintain the troublesome legacy of lamentation that arises from and falls back into silence. *Pace* Rosenzweig, who bans tragedy from the world of revelation, clearing the holy space of dialogue of any form of lament and turning it into a monotonous chorus of joy and love, Scholem and Benjamin each emphasize the sense of continuity in which the dramatic passage from myth to revelation must also be preserved on the other side of the transition and be given a religious form, so that it can be experienced by any member of the “distant community,” al-

ways *ha ba*, yet “to come” – analogous to the way the Talmud recommends the personal experience of exodus. This is more than just an analogy: the complex borderline play between silence and muteness, between immanence almost bursting open and immanence hopelessly falling back onto itself, between mourning as the first inkling of transcendence and mourning as a resigned destruction of the word, forms the original matrix of any exodic act that must pass through and then preserve within itself the Jobean stage of lament. Exodus, as the transition from the pagan to the religious, from the mythic to the messianic, is not a progress safely secured in past history: it is a troublesome actuality that must be repeated over and over again. The Hebrew lamentation is a form for this exodic *rite du passage* to express its moments of crisis.

*Judaism without tragedy*, without any operative *Aufhebung* of the tragic experience, in which the whole meaningful arrangement of the world breaks down, would thus be cut off from its vital origins, which, as with all origins, are always paradoxical and *doppelsinnig* per se. For Scholem the ambiguity of origins means the continuous emergence both of Judaism out of paganism and of true speech out of its silent matrix. As the origin of true speech, silently pointing to the word of revelation, the generative silence of lament is also paradoxical, precisely in the manner of the Cohenian *Ursprung*, an idea that intensely occupied both Scholem and Benjamin since its first formulation in Cohen’s *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*. Just like Cohen’s idea of the origin, which is based on the logic of the infinitesimal, silence can mean either a dead zero of absolute *Verstummung* – “das unendliche Nichts, die Null vom Grade Unendlich” (*Tb2*, 131: “the infinite nothing, the zero of the infinite grade”) – or an infinitely small value, which barely rises above zero and as such constitutes a paradoxical moment of transition between non-being and being, and also between speechlessness and speech. *Ursprung*, combining both qualities, vacillates between the two on the borderline of existence; it is a moment of *inversion*, which in Cohen’s system is bestowed with the unique creative power. Just as the divine *ayin*, nothingness, is a dynamic infinitesimal, remaining, as Scholem later will say, still “in the process of appearing” [*das Erscheinende*], so is its unfallen likeness in the fallen world, the silence, is equally capable of generative power in the sphere of speech.<sup>13</sup> And just as Cohen had already seen the crucial difference between the tragic hero’s downright fall and his

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. this entry from Scholem’s diary: “Silence is the source of all language (and source and development should be distinguished here), and it is to non-speaking what nothingness is to nothing” (*LY*, 209; 24 February 1918); “Schweigen ist der Ursprung der Sprache – man sollte zwischen Ursprung und Entstehung scheiden – und verhält sich zum Nicht-Reden wie das Nichts zum Nicht” (*Tb2*, 139).

infinitesimally subtle *Aufschwung*, silently indexing the future idiom of prophets, so Scholem confirms the inversive nature of the origin of speech in silence and, again like Cohen, insists on the survival of the tragic remnant within Judaism; or we might say, putting it more strongly, that he insists on the transmissibility of this “nothingness,” both destructive and creative, as the sole function of the tradition.

The term “inversion,” which emerged here under so many disguises of all sorts of turns and revolutions, was used, as I mentioned at the beginning, by Werner Hamacher in his analysis of the poetry of Paul Celan. Small wonder indeed, since Celan’s poetic idiom, which he himself described in *The Meridian* as being constantly engaged in the search for *die Umkehr*, can easily be seen as the continuation of the Scholemian-Benjaminian motif of the revolution of silence. Hamacher rightly observes that the main feature of Celan’s poetics is paranomasia: a rhetorical device referring to sequences of words marked by phonetic proximity, which parade and substitute for each other in search of a latent, always suspended and delayed, never fully articulated meaning. The same could be said about the self-destructive word sequences in Scholem’s analysis of *kinah*, or about the “material” metonymies used by the Benjaminian allegorist in the *Trauerspiel* book; these are, in fact, paranomastic parades of words that devour each other on language’s way to suicide, which is also, simultaneously, its way back to its original “state of exception.” For paranomasia is the best prosodic means at once to express mistrust in the naming power of language as it is *and* hope that a new language will emerge out of the ruins of the fallen one. Hamacher writes:

the corresponding word in implicit paranomasia remains latent, its shape uncertain, and so it exposes every word in the text to the possibility of being an alteration of some lost paradigm, which stubbornly withdraws from rational or divinatory reconstruction. Each of these words presents itself – if not exclusively, then at least primarily – as the disfiguration of what has gone silent, *a limine*, as the translation of what does not give rise to voice, as the carrying over of everything muted. What Celan writes elsewhere of a forgotten word goes for these words as well: *Dies ist ein Wort, das neben den Worten einherging, / ein Wort nach dem Bilde des Schweigens* [This is a word that walked along with the words, / a word in the image of silence]. (Hamacher 1996, 357)

The paranomastic dissemination of words allows for the articulation of silence, which, unlike in language, “the figure of falling” (Hamacher 1996, 355) remains “unfallen.” The emerging word in the image of silence – the latent word, the word-to-come – is the only thread of hope in the other, “unfallen” speech, which abstains from any reparatory inversion (of nothingness into being, of crisis into reconciliation, of trauma into working-through) but nonetheless still operates, as all language does, in the manner of inversion. This turn, however,



no longer repairs and justifies the broken whole, but lets speech rise out of the speechlessness of the tragic trauma of irreparable loss, and preserves the speaking of the originary moment of inarticulacy. The language of Celan, aired and spaced out with *Leerstellen* of silence, is thus an *anti-theodicy guaranteed linguistically*; it constitutes the very *linguistic* impossibility of any attempt at theodicy that always tries to invert the silence of loss, crisis, and trauma into a word of reparation and thus falls even deeper into the lures of myth. Only when this type of reparatory inversion is blocked, that is, when the trauma of separation is not only not talked away but affirmed and preserved, can true language – the true messianic idiom of the prophets – begin to emerge, where the inversion [*die Umkehr*] does not convert traumatized silence into healing words but lets the latent words-to-come grow directly from what is both advancing and then immediately going, slipping away, dispersing itself. In this new language, trauma and the voiceless cry never disappear for good: they forever suspend the meaningful moment of reconciliation, but do so not purely negatively, staking themselves rather on the messianic “not-yet.”

When Scholem expresses his hopes for a true language rising out of the unfallen silence, or when Benjamin spells out his fears about a too-manifest messianic idiom that would fail to be fashioned “in the image of silence,” they both mean precisely this very special type of turn, which would radically replace the linguistic theodicy of the reparatory inversion, always aiming – even against its overt intention – at some “rational or divinatory reconstruction” (Hamacher 1996, 357). Thus, if Scholemian-Benjaminian lament, constituting the traumatic matrix of “true” language, could ever break into the right articulation, it certainly would take the form of Celan’s *kinah*, stammering its “words in the image of silence.” For there is no poet more fit to invoke when recalling these lines from Scholem’s poem dedicated to Benjamin:<sup>14</sup>

Our words achieved only eloquence  
As messengers of silence.

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- CSB      Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre. New York: Schocken, 1989.

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<sup>14</sup> See the poem for Walter Benjamin from 15 May 1918 (*LY*, 239, entitled “The Ball”).

- CWB** Walter Benjamin. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Klage** Gershom Scholem. “Über Klage und Klagelied.” 1917–1918. *Tb* 128–133. For English translation, see *Lament* below.
- Lament** “On Lament and Lamentation.” Trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. 313–319 in this volume. For German original, see *Klage* above.
- LY** Gershom Scholem. *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*. Ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- OG** Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 1925, pub. 1928; trans. 1977. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.
- SW** Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. 4 vols. Michael Jennings et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1996–2003.
- Tb** Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.

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# **The Silent Syllable: On Franz Rosenzweig's Translation of Yehuda Halevi's Liturgical Poems**

## **1**

Poetry speaks with silent syllables, with secrets and contradictions written between its words. Poetry speaks from a distance, out of gaps; it speaks to us as a stranger. The path of the poem is that of the unfamiliar, yet it brings us back to meet our neighbor. The path of the poem is thus the nearest and the hardest to grasp.

The path of the poem – silent but full of weight, unfamiliar yet intimate – is imprinted in Franz Rosenzweig's German translations of Yehuda Halevi's liturgical poetry. The poem, with its tensions and contradictions, its gaps, unfamiliarities, and strangeness – is the notion (and the essence) of translation. In his translations of Halevi's poems, Rosenzweig also formulated a theory of language, reflecting the discourse of exile and homecoming, the tensions of lamentation and redemption, the challenges of foreignness and unfamiliarity, as well as the dialectic of the messianic – the dialectic of lamentation and hope. Rosenzweig's enterprise of translating Halevi's poetry was by its nature modernistic and should be understood in the context of the German poetry of his contemporaries; that is, juxtaposed with the poetical works of Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Rainer Maria Rilke. There is an element of the avant-garde in Rosenzweig's poetical interpretations, which, however, was based on a certain understanding of a return – a move back into the theological layers of Halevi's poem. Rosenzweig's translations are Germanic, and imprinted also with an expressionistic mode of thinking; yet they are touched by a desire for Hebrew, and the need to enunciate the foundations of Jewish thought. In this sense Rosenzweig's enterprise of translation has a dialogical nature: it calls two languages (German, Hebrew) into a conversation in which both languages are challenged. It is, however, a difficult dialogue between the two languages and cultures (the Hebrew and the German; the Jewish and the Christian) that took place in Rosenzweig's enterprise – a meeting that enfolded also in silence, in distance and in moments of alienation, an encounter that was imprinted by anxieties but also with messianic hopes. And this dialogue, I argue, the meeting of Hebrew and German in Rosenzweig's project, is interrupted and challenged by a "third" – the Arabic.

In my reading we will also pay attention to this “third,” the hidden, silent, almost denied figure in Rosenzweig’s work of translation, namely, the Arabic figure. The Arabic, a foundational element in Halevi’s poetic creation, is ignored and covered over in Rosenzweig’s work by the expansive gestures of the Jewish-Christian (Hebrew-German) dialogue. This “third” element, however, prevents the dialogue from descending into a false harmonization and fulfillment, and it returns to challenge the balance between the two languages (and cultures) in the foreground, recalling the foreign legacy of Halevi – lamenting and hoping for Zion in an Arabic voice.

We are thus dealing here with another interpretation of *das Unheimliche*, the unfamiliar, the uncanny – the stranger. The dialogue between Hebrew and German in Rosenzweig’s project of translating Halevi’s poetry is based on modes of self-alienation and strangeness taking place in the realm of the mother tongue, “at home.” Only at home [*Heim*], in the familiar realm of language – within intimacy, a real drama of estrangement takes place. To this drama of double-figures (the Hebrew, the German) we add a “third” figure (the Arabic) – the “he,” a figure of a silent but foundational movement in the texture of dialogue and translation in Rosenzweig’s work.

## 2

Before we discuss the figures of the foreign and the holy, the dialectic of lamentation and messianism, and before we deal with the tensions among the German, the Hebrew, and the Arabic as they are interwoven, written, and denied in Rosenzweig’s work of translation, one minor remark is still required regarding the tradition of translating Halevi into German.

The complete edition of Franz Rosenzweig’s German translations of Yehuda Halevi’s Hebrew poems was published in 1927. It included ninety-five poems, a commentary, and “ein Nachwort” – an impressive essay on the issue of translation (Rosenzweig, 1927). Rosenzweig began this enterprise of translation in 1922. Before translating Halevi’s poems, Rosenzweig had published a few translations of Hebrew prayers and Shabbat songs. Turning, however, to the translation of the poetry of Yehuda Halevi, the medieval Sephardic poet and thinker, marked a new intensity and investment in the project of liturgical translation.

Rosenzweig used for his translations the famous edition of Halevi’s Hebrew poems, the *Diwan* [collection of poems], undertaken by Shmuel David Luzzato (himself an Italian-Jewish writer of a great renown in the realm of Haskalah and Halakhah). Luzzato’s edition, based on the *Diwan* manuscript of Yicheh

Al Magrabi, was published in 1864. An earlier collection of Halevi's poems called *Betulat Bat Yehuda* had been published by Luzzato in 1840. Each collection included an interesting commentary. Luzzato's editions of Halevi's poems were a very significant foundation for the German-Jewish tradition of translating Halevi's poems into German. Most of the translations were by Jewish intellectuals and writers involved in the late stages of the Haskalah and the Jewish cultural reformation in Germany, among them two prominent figures in the establishment of *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Abraham Geiger, whose 1851 edition included translations and interpretations of seventy-five poems of Halevi (Geiger 1851), and Leopold Zunz, who included four translations of Halevi's poems in his 1855 collection *Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters* (Zunz 1855).

Alongside Geiger and Zunz mention should be made of the translations of Abraham Sulzbach (1873) and Seligmann Heller (1892). However, it was Emil Bernhard Cohen's translation of Halevi's *Diwan*, published in 1921, including more than eighty poems and a long essay on the poet's life and work, praising also the golden age of Spanish Jewry, which became the most intriguing translation informing Rosenzweig's project. As Rosenzweig claimed, Cohen's translation made him aware of the failures and difficulties – both poetical and theological – of earlier translations. Rosenzweig regarded as false and misleading not only Cohen's practice of free translation [*Nachdichten*], neglecting essential linguistic and poetical measures of the *piyut*, but also his book's interpretations. The failure of assimilation itself – the false attempt to transform the original Hebrew element of Halevi's work by converting it into German, integrating it and making it understandable for readers – was imprinted in these previous translation projects. Rosenzweig's enterprise was thus planned as a corrective act, offering a different interpretation of Halevi's poetry and thus implying a different view of the meaning of being Jewish in the world by acknowledging the original concepts of revelation and the depth of the messianic idea of the Hebrew liturgical poem. This is the context in which to situate Rosenzweig's enterprise. Like his predecessors, Rosenzweig understood Halevi's poetry to be a foundation and a source for the renewal of Jewish culture in Germany – through its addressing of productive elements of Jewish tradition, being understood as a work of exile that is dialogical in its nature, poetical in its essence, and national in its perspectives.<sup>1</sup> But his attitude toward the Hebrew sources in Halevi's poems was different from those of his precursors. He acknowledged certain theological elements in Halevi's poetry, often ignored

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1 On the significance of Rosenzweig's enterprise as a document of the German-Jewish attempt at cultural self-definition in Germany, see Benjamin 2009, 65–66.

by his predecessors, that should be translated into German, yet with their originality, distinctiveness, and foreignness maintained. For Rosenzweig, the real interest in translating Halevi was not Halevi's integration into the German language but rather his estrangement from it. His aim was to create a translation that would bring German into self-alienation, and would also force it into a radical renewal through its meeting with Hebrew. Rosenzweig's translational interpretation of the liturgical poem was thus based on a theological understanding of *Fremdheit*, foreignness. His desire was not for an integrative, harmonious, well-balanced configuration of the Jewish word in its Christian surroundings, its German cultural neighborhood, but rather for the creation of a strong sense of estrangement – a call for distortions in language through which the Jewish element, the Hebrew name, would bring about and recall the sacred. In making the German foreign to itself, the translation creates the primal texture of the sacred, the texture of the *Abgesonderten*. This is the challenge, the almost impossible task of translation. As Rosenzweig writes:

Wird der Sprache nicht mit dieser Aufgabe, den fremden Ton in seiner Fremdheit wiederzugeben, also nicht das Fremde einzudeutschen, sondern das Deutsche umzufremden, etwas Unmögliches verlangt? (Rosenzweig 1927, 154)

[Will this not be asking something impossible of language with this task to reflect the foreign tone in its foreignness: not to Germanize what is foreign, but rather to make foreign what is German? (Rosenzweig 2000, 170)]

What seems impossible yet necessary for this work of translation is not the transformation of the foreign (the Hebrew word) into a familiar German [*das Fremde einzudeutschen*], but rather the keeping of the foreignness of Hebrew, which, through its translation, causes the German language to become unfamiliar – foreign [*das Deutsche umzufremden*]. The translation from Hebrew into German thus creates something new, different, and singular, *abgesondert* [separated], and thus sacred. Rosenzweig interprets the theological implications of the *Abgesonderten* in his remarks on Halevi's poem *Yah – Befi Kedoshim* ("God in the mouth of holies"), a liturgical poem written to the prayer *ophan* which is intertwined with the image of *merkava*. Rosenzweig entitled his translation *Heilig* [sacred], and discusses its Hebrew meaning:

Das Wort Heilig hat im Hebräischen ursprünglich die Bedeutung des Abgesonderten ... Es ist der Heilige, der sich selbst besonders und überall Besonderung, Unerhörtes, Erwählung, Heiligkeit setzt. (Rosenzweig 1927, 193)

The sacred is this revelation of the unique, the special, the unheard, the absolutely new. It is a foreign appearance, unexpected in its nature, that enters the world and prevails in it as a wonder. This sacredness is expressed in a foreign

language – in the foreignness of language itself, in unfamiliarities of grammar, meter, rhyme, and the names that are produced in the translation.

The translator is thus called upon to undertake a theo-poetical task: to create literary textures of foreignness in which a foreign spirit (namely, the spirit of ancient Hebrew) is transformed into modern German.<sup>2</sup> This is how the sacred, the holy is revealed, by being re-presented through radical difference, through an estrangement of language.

I argue, following Rosenzweig, that the experience of the sacred implies the texture of the unfamiliar, the *abgesondert*, the exceptional, foreign word. It is the task of the German translator, Rosenzweig writes in his *Nachwort*, to express the unfamiliar voice of Hebrew:

Der Übersetzer macht sich zum Sprachrohr der fremden Stimme, die er über den Abgrund des Raums oder der Zeit vernehmlich macht. Wenn die fremde Stimme etwas zu sagen hat, dann muß die Sprache nachher anders aussehen als vorher. (Rosenzweig 1927, 155)

[The translator makes himself the mouthpiece of the foreign voice, which he makes audible over the gulf of space or time. If the foreign voice has something to say, then the language must afterwards appear different from before. (Rosenzweig 2000, 171)]

The task of the translator is to introduce his language with a foreign voice that carries with it the treasures of the foreign tradition. It is not only a linguistic, semantic change that the language (namely German) experiences here through translation (from Hebrew), but rather a metaphysical (spiritual) one. For the foreign words of Hebrew bring with them a new spirit:

Denn der fremde Dichter ruft in die neue Sprache nicht bloß das, was er selber zu sagen hat, hinein, sondern er bringt die Erbschaft des allgemeinen Sprachgeists seiner Sprache mit zu der neuen, so daß hier nicht bloß eine Erneuerung der Sprache durch den fremden Menschen, sondern durch den fremden Sprachgeist selber geschieht. (Rosenzweig 1927, 155)

[For indeed the foreign poet calls into the new language not merely what he himself has to say, but rather he brings along with it the heritage of the general language-spirit of his

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<sup>2</sup> In his arguments about the theological significance of making the German foreign to itself through translation (from Hebrew), Rosenzweig seems to come close to Martin Heidegger's notion of translation as discussed in his lectures on Friedrich Hölderlin's poem *Der Ister*. In his poetic dialogues and translations from Greek (the tragic work of the Greek poet Sophocles), Hölderlin creates foreign, uncanny textures, through which the German returns to itself, becoming *heimlich*. The Greek endows the German with a heroic, tragic mode of being. This is the fate of German in Hölderlin's work *Heimischwerden im Unheimlichsein*; only through being foreign does the self transform itself and become familiar (Heidegger 1993, 143–151). Rosenzweig considered translation from Hebrew as being of equal impact – bringing the German to an unfamiliarity from which, however, he suggested no return and no celebration of the self.



language to the new language, so that here not merely a renewal of the language occurs through the foreign person, but rather through the foreign language-spirit itself. (Rosenzweig 2000, 171)]

However, the possibility of translating the foreign spirit of the language [*den fremden Sprachgeist*] is based on a metaphysical assumption regarding the lost origin of language, its oneness (“*Es gibt nur eine Sprache*,” Rosenzweig writes). It is this *Ursprache*, the common, unified, hidden language of names, that makes translation possible. Only because of this substantial, *keimhaft*, common element found in all languages is the movement between the languages, the translation, and thus the dialogue between them possible. However, the realization of this possibility is also the task, the duty of translation:

Auf dieser wesenhaften Einheit aller Sprache und dem darauf beruhenden Gebot der allmenschlichen Verständigung ist die Möglichkeit wie die Aufgabe des Übersetzens, ihr Kann, Darf und Soll, begründet. Man kann übersetzen, weil in jeder Sprache jede andere der Möglichkeit nach erhalten ist; man darf übersetzen, wenn man diese Möglichkeit durch Urbarmachung solchen sprachlichen Brachlands verwirklichen kann; und man soll übersetzen, damit der Tag jener Eintracht der Sprachen, die nur in einzelnen, nicht in dem leeren Raum “zwischen” ihnen erwachsen kann, komme. (Rosenzweig 1927, 155)

[Upon this essential oneness of all language and upon the dependent commandment, namely that of universal human mutual understanding, is based the possibility as well as the task of translating, its Can, May and Shall. One can translate because in every language it contained the possibility of every other language; one may translate if one can realize this possibility through cultivation of such linguistic fallow land; and one should translate so that the day of that harmony of languages, which can grow only in each individual language, not in the empty space “between” them, may come. (Rosenzweig 2000, 171)]

The work of translation, the recreation of understanding and harmony between the languages, is a labor of theological significance. However, the return of this lost harmony of the world’s languages – their ability to enter the realm of dialogue – is based on self-alienation. Only through a radical change in its foundational textures, only through its becoming-different, does language escape its closed, hermetic structure, the structure of the self – the national structure. In being foreign to itself, language experiences an opening toward the foreign – the other language. Real dialogue thus depends upon a movement of openness in language, a movement that itself is based on self-alienation, on becoming foreign to itself.

Rosenzweig’s first (and most essential) example for this (almost impossible) work of translation – in which language is reopened through alienation, arriving at a higher order, the sacred order – is Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible. In his Bible translation, Rosenzweig argues, Luther created new

names and phrases in German, without however denying the foreign elements of the Hebrew word and by keeping its exceptional merits [*die Eigentümlichkeiten des Hebräischen*]. In transforming these foreign elements from Hebrew, Luther created new, foreign textures in the German language – the textures of the German Bible-language, which, of course, played a significant role in shaping the literary and the philosophical discourses of modern German.<sup>3</sup> An act of translation from Hebrew became a constitutive gesture in the foundation of high-modern German, reforming and enriching all its layers. However, the enterprise of the Bible translation, Rosenzweig reminds his readers, was also part of the Reformation movement through which the German people entered the realm of *Weltgeschichte* (Rosenzweig 1927, 157). The Bible translation, based on the self-alienation of German and thus on the sacrifice of its *völkische Abgeschlossenheit*, the national closure, was a step of opening, a step toward higher stages of historical and theological fulfillment.

When approaching the translation of Halevi's liturgical poems, Rosenzweig had a similar task in mind: one bearing, however, a different theological accent.

### 3

In writing about the task of translation and the challenge of transforming the spiritual element of Hebrew into German, Rosenzweig deals with three main issues: meter, rhyme, and the Mosaic style. The challenge of meter, he writes, is the most difficult, the most foreign:

Schwieriger liegt die Frage für das Metrum. Hier besteht wirklich eine starke Fremdheit. (Rosenzweig 1927, 158)

[The question of the metre is more difficult. Here lies a really marked foreignness. (Rosenzweig 2000, 174)]

Here, in the realm of meter, the essence of foreignness, *die Fremdheit*, is expressed. Not only is a different materiality of the language being expressed, but also the different spiritual depth of Hebrew, the sacred element itself. What makes the Hebrew meter so different and foreign and so difficult to translate into German is the prosodic element that Rosenzweig calls “die stumme Silbe”

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<sup>3</sup> On Rosenzweig's argument regarding the influence of Luther's Bible translation on modern German literature and thought, see also his lecture, “Vom Geist der Hebräischen Sprache” (Rosenzweig 1984, 719–721).

[the silent syllable], which, he argues, was an original prosodic element developed by the Spanish Jewish poets to distinguish Hebrew meter from the prominent Arabic one (Rosenzweig 1927, 159).

Rosenzweig refers here to the metrical invention of the tenth-century Hebrew poet Dunash Ben Labrath, who introduced the quantitative metrical system to Hebrew poetry (Schirrmann 1954, 31–33). The quantitative meter, Arabic in origin, was derived from secular poetry that was written and sung in Nord Africa and Al-Andalus. The Arabic system was based on a clear differentiation between short and long vowels. In Hebrew, however, such a clear difference does not exist. Therefore Dunash developed an analogous system based on the use of two kinds of syllables. The first syllable is called *Yated*. It is a long syllable that consists of a combination of two vowels: the first is a mobile *Shewa* or a *Chataf*, and the second is regular. The second kind of syllable used in this Hebrew metrical system is called *Tenuha*, consisting of one regular vowel and therefore considered a short syllable. This metrical system of Dunash Ben Labrat, based on the quantitative Arabic system, although resisted by certain Hebrew schools, especially the students of Menachem Ben Seruk, became common in the world of Hebrew poetry in medieval Spain and was used for the creation of classical poems with simple forms, as well as for strophic poems, called *Muwasach*, which are based on rich, colorful, and asymmetrical combinations of long and short syllables. The quantitative meter was interlaced in both the secular and the sacred realms of poetry. Many of Halevi's liturgical poems are written in this kind of meter. It is known that the late Halevi himself opposed the use of the Arabic meter, as he writes in an essay dedicated to Haphon Ben Nethanel. The main arguments are contained also in the *Book of Kuzari*, in which Halevi states that the use of foreign meter is an act of revolt that harms Hebrew by denying the biblical traditions governing metrical stress. The meter, it is argued, damages the natural flow of language by forcing it into artificial structures (Halevi, *The Book of Kuzari*, 77). The burden of Arabic meter is thus equal to that of exile – it is a foreign measure occupying Hebrew. Halevi wrote these words against quantitative meter and the use of Arabic poetic conventions late in his life, before leaving Spain on his great journey to Eretz Israel. In his poems, however, from the earliest to the latest, including the later poems of Zion, Halevi retained the Arabic measures. This is evidence of an inner tension in his world, a tension also between poetry and philosophy, which, however, expresses the tension of being Jewish in the Islamic world.

Let us return to Rosenzweig's writings. What Rosenzweig calls in the *Nachwort* "stumme Silbe," a silent syllable, is this first vowel used for the building of the *Yated* – the short, almost unheard movement of the mobile *Shewa*. This

is the syllable that he considered to be an original Hebrew element, the philological-poetic invention through which the Hebrew poem is defined. In his minor remark on innovations in meter, Rosenzweig thus points to not only a linguistic but also a cultural event of great significance that took place in the Jewish world. In his argument, however, he stresses the difference and the separation between the Hebrew and the Arabic metric measures and neglects acknowledging the influence of Arabic poetry on Jewish writing.<sup>4</sup> In so doing Rosenzweig also ignores the cultural dialogue between Judaism and Islam, a religion he considers “pagan.”<sup>5</sup> In his book *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Rosenzweig discusses the failures of Islam, explicating its dogmatic, corrupted theological nature that lacks in his view any dialogical merits (Rosenzweig 1988 [1921], 184–186). In Rosenzweig’s view Islam exists as a lower theological order than Judaism and Christianity because it possesses neither a genuine culture of prayer nor a liturgy in which God is summoned to a real conversation with his believers.<sup>6</sup> In Islam, he argues, God is not expected to answer the call of his believers. In this sense there is no ground in this world for the development of a sacred poetry similar to that of the Hebrew *piyut*. In light of these assumptions Rosenzweig ignored the significance of Arabic literature in the liturgical creation of Yehuda Halevi and his contemporaries.

## 4

Returning to Rosenzweig’s arguments on the crucial role of the Hebrew (Arabic) rhythmic measures in being transformed into German, we have established that the Hebrew liturgical poem introduces a foreign metrical dimension into German, one that is free from the considerations of the common tonic meter in European poetry. Here, Rosenzweig writes, lies the translator’s challenge in bringing a new meter, “a new tone,” into the realm of German language and poetry:

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4 Among the vast literature on the influences of Arabic literature and thought on Hebrew poetry in Spain, see especially Yalin 1975, 139–152.

5 In one of his notes/letters gathered in the corpus entitled “Paralipomena” from November 1916, Rosenzweig writes: “Das Heidentum ist doch wirklich erst im Islam eine Religion geworden” (Rosenzweig 1984, 110). What Rosenzweig stresses here is the character of Islam as a “religion” – a phenomenon that he considers to be on a lower order of theological experience, lacking a real view of revelation and discursive elements.

6 On Rosenzweig’s negation of Islam as part of his apologetic attitude towards the cultural dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, see Schwartz 2003.

Und hier liegt nun die Wurzel der Schwierigkeit auch für den Übersetzer. Denn im Deutschen ist seit dem siebzehnten Jahrhundert das Prinzip aufgebracht und durch die klassische Dichtung von 1800 unerschütterlich festgerammt, daß die Prosabetonung der Worte im Vers gewahrt bleiben müsse, ein Prinzip, das erst in den jüngsten Jahrzehnten durch die Georgische Schule mit ihrer Forderung des gleichschwebenden Tons eine gewisse Modifikation zu erfahren beginnt. Die Herrschaft nun dieses Prinzips ist so absolut, daß es dem Heutigen schwer fällt, auch nur die Möglichkeit anderer Prinzipien für die Vergangenheit recht zu begreifen. (Rosenzweig 1927, 159)

[And here lies the root of the difficulty for the translator as well. For in German, the following principle has been arising since the seventeenth century and has been impenetrably immured through the classical poetry of 1800: that the prose stress of the words in the verse must be preserved, a principle that only in the most recent decades begins to experience a certain modification through the George School with its demand of the equal level stress. The domination of this principle is now so absolute that it is difficult for someone today correctly to comprehend even the possibility of other principle which applied for the past. (Rosenzweig 2000, 175)]

Since the time of Goethe, Rosenzweig writes, German poetry has been governed by the principles of the tonic meter and subjected to a rigorous system of stressed syllables. Only in the first decade of the twentieth century, in the modernist circles of Stefan George, was this system challenged by the innovation of the *gleichschwebender Ton*, a principle of vocal stress that was liberated from the traditional structure of the classical poem and enjoyed a certain amount of freedom in the setting of the stressed syllables.

This is how one should understand the challenge of translating Halevi's poems into German, which involved also the creation of new metric textures equivalent to those of modernist poetry. The translation of the Hebrew liturgical poem brings about a significant change in the metric layer of the poetic language, liberating the German language from narrow classical forms and opening up new possibilities of literary expression, in which the sacred itself is expressed. This is how one should understand the significance of the metric transformations: the distortions of classical German metric grammar caused by the translation of the Hebrew poem are not only the expressions of a radical philological difference. Rather, these grammatical ruptures are expressions of a metaphysical difference, expressions of the unfamiliar, the sacred.

## 5

Besides the challenge of the metric transformation and its significance, Rosenzweig discusses another layer in the order of translation – the issue of the *Musivstil* (the Mosaic style). What is usually referred to as *Musivstil* is the exten-

sive quotation of biblical phrases and their integration as a mosaic in the poem, creating rich poetical textures in Hebrew. What Rosenzweig sees in this technique, however, is not only the poetical enrichment of the Hebrew by an extensive use of biblical sources, but also an expression of the Jewish understanding of being-in-exile:

Alle jüdische Dichtung im Exil verschmäht es, dieses ihr Im-Exil-Sein zu ignorieren. Das würde geschehen, wenn sie jemals wie andre Dichtung die Welt unmittelbar aufnähme. Denn die Welt, die sie umgibt, ist Exil und soll es ihr bleiben. Und in dem Augenblick, wo sie diese Haltung aufgäbe, wo sie sich dem Einstrom dieser Welt öffnete, würde ihr diese Welt heimisch, horte auf, Exil zu sein. Diese Exilierung der Umwelt aber wird geleistet durch die ständige Gegenwärtigkeit des Schriftworts. Mit ihm schiebt sich eine andere Gegenwart vor die umgebende und setzt diese zum Schein, genauer, zum Gleichnis herab. (Rosenzweig 1927, 161)

[All Jewish poetry in exile scorns to ignore this being-in-exile. It would have ignored its exile if it ever, like other poetry, took in the world directly. For the world which surrounds it is exile, and is supposed to remain so to it. And the moment that it would surrender this attitude, when it would open itself to the inflow of this world, this world would be as a home for it, and it would cease to be exile. This exiling of the surrounding world is achieved through the constant presence of the scriptural word. With the scriptural word another present thrusts itself in front of the surrounding present and downgrades the latter to an appearance, or more precisely, as parable. (Rosenzweig 2000, 177)]

The return of biblical Hebrew through quotations integrated in the medieval liturgical poem brings about a strange texture – a texture of non-belonging. The poem that speaks with biblical phrases, with words and names that come from a distance, from a non-place and a non-time, thus embodies an inner notion of exile. The poem is written in a language that is not of the “here and now,” but rather of lost places and times. This distance and non-belonging is the effect of being-in-exile. But this idea of exile, in itself, holds messianic power, for it requires hope and belief in what is not here and not now, but rather always at a distance, still on its way, being endlessly coming toward us. The *Musivstil* thus gives evidence for the essence of the liturgical poem as the creation of an exilic mind, imprinted, however, with a strong messianic purpose. The poem laments the condition of a broken being and expresses the distortions of the present (the tensions of not-being in place and time). Out of this crisis, however, and out of this crisis alone, should the “new day” arise.

## 6

The dialectic of lament and messianism, the productive tensions between the cry of mourning and the call of redemption, the circles of grief and hope that

are heard so often in the Hebrew tradition, appear in Yehuda's Halevi's liturgical work and are expressed also in his poetry of Zion – a late cycle of poems written before and during his journey to Eretz Israel, partly in Spain, partly during the sea voyage, and partly while staying in Alexandria. The poems of Zion are considered a special section in Halevi's work. As love poems they are regarded as profane, but have nevertheless been accepted into the corpus of prayer and are considered to be liturgical. Most of the poems are written in the classical form, following the rules of the quantitative meter ("the Arabic meter"). In his translation Rosenzweig included twenty-three poems from this cycle, gathered in the last chapter of his book entitled "Zion." In his remarks on Halevi's poems he discusses also the messianic idea that is expressed in them. Following Luzzato, Rosenzweig notes the traces of the messianic figure in the poem "Dove of Distance," including the famous words of prayer, "Stand and return to the land of the deer." In his remarks on Halevi's famous poem, Luzzato argued that the poem was written "when the (false) rumor was heard that the redemption of Israel was about to come" (Luzzato 1864, B[1]). He refers to the intensive messianic activity among the Jews of Spain in the third decade of the eleventh century, during the years of depression and terror caused by the wars between Christians and Muslims. It has been argued that Halevi himself was swept away by these strong messianic emotions and hopes being expressed in his poem.<sup>7</sup> Rosenzweig writes in his commentary on Halevi's poem that the desire to fulfill these messianic hopes, which implies a radical belief in redemption, brought about the failures and deceptions of false messianism. In his view, however, false messianism also provides evidence for the depth and intensity of the messianic idea in Judaism:

Denn die Erwartung des Messias, von der und um derentwillen das Judentum lebt, wäre ein leeres Thelogumen, eine bloße "Idee," ein Geschwätz, – wenn sie sich nicht immer wieder verwirklichte und entwirklichte, täuschte und enttäuschte an der Gestalt des "falschen Messias." Der falsche Messias ist so alt wie die Hoffnung des echten. (Rosenzweig 1927, 239)

The false messiah is as old as the hope of messianism itself, Rosenzweig writes, and his reappearance thus indicates how real and essential this idea is in the Jewish world, and how high a price Judaism has to pay time and again for its essential devotion to the idea of redemption. What then is the nature of this messianic idea? Rosenzweig answers: It is the hope for a "radical change" [*eine radikale Veränderung*, 241] in the nature of being. But this hope, Rosenzweig

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<sup>7</sup> Among the (short) classical biographical remarks on the poet life and letters, see Schirmann 1979, 292–293.

writes in his comment to the poem “My God, Your Pavilions of Friendship,” cannot be fulfilled except in prayers, requests, preparations, and eschatological calculations.

The messianic idea seems to imply a radical but false belief in the possibility of a foundational change taking place in our time. Rosenzweig therefore distinguishes the hope for redemption from the actual belief in it, which is more radical and real and therefore tends to collapse into false messianism. Yet this messianic idea implies “not only redemption from the pressure of the present life ... a rescue from the inferno of world history” (Rosenzweig 1927, 241), but also the surmounting of worldly existence’s ambivalence [*Zweideutigkeit*] and irresponsibility [*Verantwortungslosigkeit*]. The messianic idea thus overcomes the demonic structure of this world, a world of ambivalences and gaps, differences and double meanings, a world without absolute truth. But this messianic idea, the desire for redemption and the end of the world as we know it, Rosenzweig writes, implies also a frightening experience of thought – the experience of the end of life, the experience of approaching death.

This is the syntax of the messianic idea expressed in Halevi’s poem: out of despair and the notion of grief, out of the experience of failure and great disappointment, and out of the depths of mourning, the belief in the coming of the messiah gains new strength. This is what Rosenzweig argues regarding the messianic syntax that is also found in Halevi’s poem “A Distant Dove Wanders to the Woods”:

Doch grade aus der Verzweiflung an allen Errechnen schlägt, wie einst dem Propheten (Jeremiah 20.9) aus seinem verzweifelten Versuch, des Namens “nicht mehr zu gedenken,” die Flamme der Glaubenskraft neu empor und trägt mit letzter Gewalt das “Er komme!” des Psalms (50.3) himmelwärts, das in dem scheinbar so künstlichen Rhythmus des Gedichts von Anfang an seiner Auferstehung entgegengeharrt zu haben scheint. (Rosenzweig 1927, 240)

The belief in the return of the messiah is spoken out of lament. This is the way the *Klage*, the poem of lamentation, turns into a song of joy. With this remark we turn to Rosenzweig’s translation and reading of Halevi’s great poem “Zion, Won’t You Ask.”

## 7

Halevi’s Zion poetry should be read initially in its own context, following its own textual logic, for it is the texture of this poetry that embodies the movements, the desires, the memories, and the anxieties of the pilgrim, the poet



himself.<sup>8</sup> But the poems of journey, prayer, and lament, the call for the return to Zion, should not simply be understood as programmatic texts, but rather as theo-poetical documents in which desires and phantasies are enfolded and transformed into ambiguous phrases of absolute desire – the desire of the sacred. It is the language of prayer, a desperate plea and a hopeless hope, that these poems adopt. In the poems of Zion a movement prevails – the movement of a pilgrim, a journey of mourning and messianic hope. This movement is also expressed very strongly in Halevi's poem "Zion Won't You Ask." The complexity of the poem, its significance and its influence on the history of Hebrew poetry, cannot easily be summarized (Yahalom 2008, 1–14). The poem was accepted into the corpus of lamentations on the destruction of the Temple included in the Ashkenazi prayer book. It was studied and reproduced, quoted and alluded to in many different contexts of Hebrew writing over the generations. This poem, however, which cries out the name of Zion and tells the story of its destruction and the hope for its redemption, which laments the ruins of the city and its Temple and appeals for its renewal – this poem is also grounded in the Arabic poetry of desire, elaborating on the notion of the "captives of love." What is quoted here, in Halevi's most famous poem of Zion, are the Arabic topoi of desert poems, in which the lover laments – as a captive of his own desire – the loss of his beloved, even as he celebrates the hope of her return. The Jewish prayer for the return to Zion can be said only in this voice, the voice of an Arabic-speaking lover.

In his commentary Rosenzweig acknowledges that Halevi implies in his poem "the meter of the Arabic poetry" (Rosenzweig 1927, 258). His reading, however, is devoted to the ambiguity of lamentation and joyful (messianic) expression. It is the syllable of lament, namely *ayikh*, repeated in the closing rhyme of the poem, that resemble the word *Eikhah* [how], the cry of mourning, the call of despair that repeats itself and finds no answer in the Hebrew lamentations.

Rosenzweig sees how the lamenting rhyme (*ayikh*), the voice of these despairing bodies of exile, is transformed in this poem into joyful, hopeful expression:

אֲשֶׁרִי מִחֶכְהָ וְנִגְיַע וְיִרְאָה עֲלוֹת/אוֹרֶה וַיִּבְקְעוּ עָלָיו שְׁחָרִיף,  
לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹבֵת בְּתִירִיף וְלַעֲלֹז בְּשִׁמְ/חַתֶּהָ בְּשׁוֹבֶהָ אֵלַי קִדְמַת נְעוּרֶיהָ!

<sup>8</sup> Compare Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's remarks on the textures of pilgrimage in Halevi's Zion poetry, stressing the historical, theological, personal and collective ambiguities of his motifs and figures: Ezrahi 2000, 33–51. See also Scheindlin 2008, 155–247.

And in Rosenzweig's translation:

Selig, wer harrt, und erlebts, und schaut, wie aufgeht dein Licht,  
Des Strahlgeschosse die nächtigen Schatten durchschlagen,  
Deine Erwählten zu schaun im Glück, zu jubeln mit dir,  
Die neu du jugendlich prangst wie einst in Untragen. (Rosenzweig 1927, 150)

[Blessed is he who stands and waits, and sees your light rising as dawn breaks over him,  
and beholds the wealth of your chosen, and rejoices  
In your joy when you regain the vigor of your youth.<sup>9</sup>]

In his interpretation of Halevi's poem, Rosenzweig notices that *ayikh*, the lamenting rhyme of the poem (which Rosenzweig transformed in his translation into *en*), is also the sign of a female body, a plea and a calling for a beloved woman. It is the sacred name of the city, the name of Knesset Israel as well, that resonates in this syllable. The syllable of lamentation that turns into a messianic expression is also the syllable of love. And this, the poetics of love, as we have seen, is not without ground in Halevi's liturgical work. And the ground is that of medieval Spain, the ground of Andalusia.

## 8

The quest for Zion in Halevi's poem is written with a lamenting rhyme, an echo of *Eikhah* – “the language of lamentation, the language of reproof.”<sup>10</sup> It is a voice of grief, a cry that God himself is unable to bear without the help of the angels, the fathers, and the woman, namely Rachel.<sup>11</sup> It is the voice itself, a creaturely voice, the voice of an animal, that is imprinted on this lamenting word, a word that comes before (and after) all words, a moaning, a roaring, a crowing, a lowing.<sup>12</sup> But this lamenting voice, Rosenzweig stresses in his commentary, is also messianic, for it announces a redemptive movement – the return of light, the morning hour, the sense of a new day to come.

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<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Levin's English translation of Halevi's “Zion, Won't You Ask” is cited here (Levin 2002, 102).

<sup>10</sup> On the vocal implication of the cry *Eikhah* and its (inverted) theological meaning, see *Midrash Eikhah the Great*, 1, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the intensive interpretation given in *Midrash Eikhah the Great*, “An Opening,” 24–25.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Midrash “Eikhah Hanehelam” in the Book of Zohar, dealing with the creaturely voices of lamentation (Book of Zohar, New Zohar, 110–113).

This is how we understand Rosenzweig's remarks on stressing the syllable of lamentation in the translation of Halevi's Zion poems, in which the dialectic of tradition itself is expressed between poles of destruction and redemption, creaturely life and the sublime, being-in-exile and the cognition of return. One recalls, however, a latent, unheard, almost forgotten voice, a "silent syllable" written in Halevi's poetry, a remnant of the Arab-Jewish cultural dialogue that is incorporated in Rosenzweig's translation (and commentaries) into the intensive textures of German. In his project Rosenzweig stressed the influence of Hebrew, whose essence he understood as being biblical – and its power as being messianic, imprinting all language with the quest for a "radical change," which is nothing less than the quest for justice.<sup>13</sup> In his view this was also the mission of translation, bringing the spirit of Hebrew into the world, a world he considered and imagined to be essentially Christian. These are the assumptions imprinted also in his translation of and commentary on Halevi's poem "Since You were the Home of Love":

חָנוּ אֶהְיֶה בְּאֶשֶׁר חָנִיתָ.	מֵאֲזוּ מְעוֹן הָאֱהָבָה הָיִיתָ
עֲזָבָם – יָעֲנוּ אֶתְאֶשֶׁר עֲנִיתָ.	תּוֹכָחוֹת מְרִיבֵי עָרְבוּ לִי עַל שְׁמִי
כִּי רָדְפוּ חָלַל אֶשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ.	לְמַדּוּ תְרוּנָה אוֹיְבֵי – וְאֶהְבֶּם
– כִּי לֹא אֶכְבֵּד אֶתְאֶשֶׁר בָּזִיתָ	מִיּוֹם בָּזִיתָנִי בְּזִיתִנִּי אֲנִי
אֶלְנִתְחַלְתֶּךָ זֹאת אֶשֶׁר פָּדִיתָ	עַד יַעֲבֹרֻעַם וְתִשְׁלַח עוֹד פְּדוּת

In Rosenzweig's translation is poem is entitled "Feindesliebe":

Von eh warst Du der Liebe Himmelsveste / mein Lieben nistete bei Dir im Neste.  
Scheltworte meines Feinds, sie freun mich, Deinethalb / laß ihn – sein Druck preßt, den  
Dein Druck längst preßte.  
Es lernte Deinen Grimm der Feind: drum lieb ich ihn / denn seine Faust trifft Deines  
Schlags Gebreste.  
Verwarfst Du mich, den Tag verwarf ich selber mich / wie gönnt ich dem den Du verwarfst  
das Beste!  
Bis einst Dein Groll vergeht und Du Erlösung schickst / des einst von Dir erlösten Erbes  
Reste. (Rosenzweig 1927, 108)

[Ever since You were the home of love for me, my love has lived where You have lived.  
Because of You, I have delighted in the wrath of my enemies; let them be, let them tor-  
ment the one whom You tormented.  
It was from You that they learned their wrath, and I love them, for they hound the wound-  
ed one whom You struck down.

<sup>13</sup> On the language of justice being the heritage of ancient Hebrew, flowing (through translation) into the being of the world's nations, see also Rosenzweig's 1921 essay, "Vom Geist der Hebräischen Sprache" (Rosenzweig 1984, 719–721).

Ever since You despised me, I have despised myself, for I will not honour what You despise.  
 So be it, until Your anger has passed, and again You will redeem  
 Your own possession, which You once redeemed.<sup>14]</sup>

The poem is written to accompany the prayer “The creator of lights,” and is based on the quantitative “Arabic” meter. In his translation Rosenzweig calls the poem “Feindesliebe” and reads it as corresponding to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, and thus as the Jewish challenge to the Christian demand to “love your enemy” [*Gebot der Feindesliebe*]. He writes:

Die christliche Feindesliebe ist eine Wirklichkeit, wo sie nichts anderes sein kann. In diesen Stand des Nichtanderskönnens tritt sie da, wo die Kirche oder der Einzelne dem Urgebot des Christentums folgen: zu missionieren. Die Feindesliebe wird da die stärkste Waffe der Weltbeziehung, der Feind geliebt als der künftige Bruder. Jüdische Feindesliebe muß also wohl etwas ganz anderes sein, wenn sie wirklich sein soll. Denn hier ist die Wirklichkeit nicht die einer mit den Gnaden des Siegens sondern mit denen des Unterliegens begnadeten Gemeinschaft. (Rosenzweig 1927, 161)

The Christian, Rosenzweig argues, demands *Feindesliebe* as a means of imperialistic love, that of a mission. With his love the Christian occupies the world. The Jewish *Feindesliebe* is, however, different, for it expresses the being of the occupied, the experience of destruction, defeat, and loss, which is related to and justified as the judgment of God.

The Jewish love for the enemy is not a gesture of religious mission; its task is not an opening toward the world. It is not a gesture of Reformation, nor is it an attempt to enter *Weltgeschichte* (we recall Rosenzweig referring to Luther). It is rather a gesture of acceptance.

More should be said of course on the meaning and role of love in Rosenzweig’s thought, mainly as it was introduced in his book *Der Stern der Erlösung*. Rosenzweig discusses love in relation to the category of revelation [*Offenbarung*], which itself is understood as an event of language. Love is movement in(to) the world, into its present (Rosenzweig 1988 [1921], 174–175). It is the notion and the experience of the lover (and not of the beloved) that defines the language of revelation. God’s own revelation is the expression of a divine love to the (human) spirit. The revelation is based on the call, the appeal to *Du*, you, and the expression of love – *du bist mein*, you are mine (Rosenzweig 1988 [1921], 203–204). This event – God’s revelation as a lover – is the highest form of re-presentation. This also underlies the grammar of the prayer that

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<sup>14</sup> English translation by T. Carmi.

seeks and cries for the return of God as a lover. And therefore, as Rosenzweig himself stresses, love is always being defined and captured in the circle of *ich und du*, I and Thou. The *Er*, he, the “third,” is denied, banished from the realm of love (Rosenzweig 1988 [1921], 207; 227–228). This kind of love, as the Song of Songs phrases it, is as “strong as death” and thus transforms into life, into the present, the power of death. It is an extreme definition of love. And also extreme, we recall, is the *Feindesliebe*, which Rosenzweig discusses in his comments on Halevi’s poem. However: “Is there any extreme in love?”:

Die Liebe, mit der ein Mensch Gott liebt, wird zum Lebensgesetz aller Liebe, mit der er Menschen lieben kann, bis hinaus in das Extrem – aber gibt es für die Liebe ein Extrem? (Rosenzweig 1927, 161)

In this “extreme” poem of love, however, again there is written a “silent syllable.” In the *Diwan* edition of Luzzato, the first critical edition of Halevi’s poetry to include this poem, we find a hint of the origin of this poem. Luzzato writes:

הרעיון הזה (מיום בְּיָתִי בְּיָתִי) אולי לקוח הוא מאיזה משורר ישמעאלי שאמר כן לחשוקתו, אך כלפי האל הוא מאמר בלתי נאות כי חפץ האל הוא שהחוטא יכיר חטאתו ויטיב מעלליו, ומי שהוא שב מדרכיו הרעים איננו בזה את עצמו.  
(Luzzato 1864, B[2])

[The idea of the poem (the self-contempt), is possibly taken from an Arab poet who wrote this to his beloved. But relating this to God is not appropriate; for God’s desire is that the sinner will be aware of his sin and conduct himself better. The one who returns from his evil path does not disgrace himself.]

Luzzato regrets that Halevi transformed this extreme motif of love taken from an Arab poem of desire into the realm of liturgical poetry. And indeed, Halevi’s poem was based on the translation and adaption of an Arabic poem from the eighth century, attributed to Abu A-Shiz-Al-Chazehi (Levin 2009, 291–353). The enemies of whom the poem speaks are the double-figures of the lover who are interwoven in the discourse of desire and who torture the lover because of his faithful love. Halevi adopted these Arabic figures and transformed them into biblical language, the language of the Song of Songs and the book of Deuteronomy.

It is not only the acknowledgment of a figure of profane love being transformed into the liturgical realm that calls for our attention. The transfusion of meter and rhyme, of prosodic elements, phrases, and of motifs, titles and names from the profane realm into that of the sacred: this represented a foundational movement in the world of Hebrew letters. But what deserves our attention above all is rather the disappearance of this figure and its transfiguration into a “third” – an anonymous, unrepresented, silent body of prayer. The “li-

turgical gesture,” the silent, holy gesture of prayer is fulfilled differently once it involves a recollection of the “third.” A different, perhaps higher order of dialogue is being signified here – an order that enfolds beyond the encounter of *ich und du*, beyond the polar, binary scheme of conversation, beyond the safe, well-defined borders of the community of prayer.

We return thus to our point of departure – to the argument concerning the poem and its “third,” its silent, hidden path that leads to an encounter with the foreigner, who is, I argue, a stranger among us, a neighbor.

The form and the content of Yehuda Halevi’s poetry, the material and the meter, came from the places where Jews and Arabs alike lived and wrote. The poems express the grammar of desire, moving between longing and contempt, torture and redemption. In Halevi’s poems we hear the memories of a distressed neighborhood, as well as the lament for the days of oppression and sorrow.

And perhaps this is also the meaning of this “stumme Silbe,” the silent syllable, in which Rosenzweig saw the uniqueness of Hebrew poetry that breaks the European metrical scheme and brings a new, foreign, unusual, and thus sacred movement to German, namely, a movement of messianic measure. The German poem thus hides the Hebrew-Arabic syllable – silent, but full of weight.

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Bernd Witte

## **Silence, Solitude, and Suicide: Gershom Scholem's Paradoxical Theory of Lamentation**

Gershom Scholem died in 1982 at the age of 85. Ten years later I was in Jerusalem for a conference on Walter Benjamin and met Scholem's widow Fania. She invited me for a cup of tea at her house in Rechavia, where she had lived with Gershom since their marriage in 1936. There she told me about her recollections of her husband's bibliomania and eventually turned to the subject of the last days of his life. She remembered that five days before his death he had gone to bed, turned to the wall, and would not speak with her, a refusal that lasted until he died. This final silence of her husband of more than forty years still oppressed the old woman ten years later, so much that she started crying.

What significance should one attribute to this final silence of a man who was otherwise so talkative? Until now I had understood it as the admission by Scholem that the project to which he had dedicated his life had failed. As a young man he had proposed to analyze the "totality of Kabbalah" by means of "philology." Via this enterprise, he had intended to give a center, a living heart, to the Jewish state, which Zionism was about to erect in Palestine. But already in the middle of the 1940s, this goal had proved to be unattainable. Judaism as it developed in the new settlements in Palestine took a totally different direction, mostly under the influence of rabbinic, secular, or socialist traditions. The scholar doing research on the history of Kabbalah was certainly unable to identify with any of these political options. In 1944, in his essay "Überlegungen zur Wissenschaft vom Judentum" ("Considerations on the Science of Judaism"), Scholem passed the following judgment on Leopold Zunz and Moritz Steinschneider, the founding fathers of Jewish studies in Germany: "These two have interiorized totally the liquidating tendencies of their enterprise. Their hidden nihilism has something noble and it has the effect of a creative desperation with them" (Scholem 1997, 28). These sentences can also be read as the Kabbalah's scholar's self-accusation. His "science of mysticism" is also a form of liquidation of a living Judaism. He, too, started out a "rebel" and ended up a successor of the historical school in philology prevalent in Germany in the nineteenth century. "Nihilism as a religious phenomenon," the state of mind he diagnoses in heretics such as Sabbatai Zevi, is also most intimately his own; and at the same time it is the cause of the failure of his attempt to renew Judaism.



Reading his early diaries, one might arrive at a different interpretation of Scholem's silence. In his early twenties he not only considers silence to be at the center of his understanding of Zionism, but he takes it to be the basic concept of his theory of language, which he regards as an original one. In October 1917 he definitively renounces his close relationship with Martin Buber, whom he had admired as prophet and spiritual leader and under whose guidance he had rediscovered his own Judaism. Now he accuses Buber of a "lack of Torah" [*Thoralosigkeit*], of "untruthfulness" [*Unwahrhaftigkeit*], of "chattering about experiences" [*Erlenisschwätzerei*]; he even calls him a "heretic" [*Irrlehrer*] (*Tb2*, 62 ff.). At the same time he distances himself from the Jewish youth movement inspired by Buber's teachings. Under Buber's influence, Scholem argues, it has gone "from Berlin to Prague." In 1910–1911 Buber had given his "Three Speeches on Judaism" in Prague and found a huge number of followers among the city's young students. In his letters, echoing sentiments expressed in his diary, Scholem settles the score with these students and tries to persuade them to leave the organized youth movement. Under the heading of "Farewell" he voices his radical rejection of the youth movement in an open letter to Siegfried Bernfeld, editor of the journal *Jerubbaal*. In his letter he advises young Jews to abstain from "intoxication through experiences" [*Rausch der Erlebnisse*]. The spheres in which the life of a Zionist should unfold should be "silence, hard work and insight, purity, strictness and sacrifice" [*Schweigen, Arbeit und Erkenntnis, Reinheit, Strenge und Verzicht*]. Basically, Scholem acknowledges as acceptable Zionist action only the solitary study of the Torah in its original language. This can be accomplished only by keeping silence. He himself did not intend anything else by hinting at his silent method as a way "to give testimony for a youth which receives, develops and hands on Zion and the teachings in silence." By quoting the last sentence of Hamlet in Shakespeare's play – "The rest is silence" – Scholem brings his quarrel with the Jewish youth movement to a close (*Tb2*, 285–291).

Yet Scholem wants to found a new community on the basis of "communal solitude" [*gemeinsamer Einsamkeit*]. He derives this more-than-idiosyncratic definition of the goals of Zionism from his own method of adopting the Jewish tradition. For him, the main road to approach Zion is the learning of Biblical Hebrew. While working on translations of the biblical laments he remarks: "The power of Hebrew overpowers me so much that I cannot do differently than to experience Hebrew even in the German language" (*Tb2*, 87). In Scholem's view, the language of Torah, the holy language, can be acquired not by communicating, but only by learning it in silence. That's why he stipulates: "The sphere of teaching acknowledges only one foundation and one requirement: that is silence" (*Tb2*, 197). Further on, he describes his method by the

mysterious phrase “to be silent Hebraically” [*hebräisch schweigen*] (*Tb2*, 164), which, in the first place, points to his own way of life, centered on the solitary, non-communicative study of the canonical scriptures. On this foundation, Scholem builds his utopian vision of Zionism, which he imagines as a “large secret society” [*großen Geheimbund*] (*Tb2*, 57). In it all men should be gathered “who acknowledge the program of *goij kaddosch* in the Torah,” alluding to Exodus 19.6 and its phrase “the chosen people.”

But Scholem not only makes silence the centerpiece of his definition of Zionism; he also finds in it the basis of his theory of language. In the context of his epilogue “On Lament and Lamentation” (*Lament*), written on 2 December 1917, he states: “Silence is the origin of language” [*Schweigen ist der Ursprung der Sprache*] (*Tb2*, 139). This sentence has to be understood, as explained above, in the context of his own practice: only by studying silently will one be able to learn Hebrew adequately. But here Scholem means something different: silence that has not “undergone the primeval sin” is the only guarantee that speaking is possible; it is a necessary antecedent and prerequisite of linguistic truth. The language of lament, for Scholem, is the equivalent of this paradoxical phenomenon. From his work on the translation of Hebrew dirges into German he concludes that in lament language annihilates itself: that is, it turns into silence. So he defines lament in brief: “Lament is language disappearing” (*Tb2*, 158).

This definition is only understandable if one sees in language an unending continuum that reaches from revelation – in which language reveals itself as absolutely positive – to the negative pole of silence, at which point language becomes nothing. On this continuum, lament marks the border at which the human language transforms itself into silence: “Lament is nothing other than a language on the border, language of the border itself” [*Sprache der Grenze selbst*] (*Lament*, 313). As a borderline phenomenon, lament still participates in human language, but at the same time it causes language’s annihilation. That is the significance of Scholem speaking of the extinction of the identity of the object in lament [*das Erlöschen der Identität des Gegenstands*]: “Lament has a form, but has no content” [*Sie hat Gestalt, aber sie hat keinen Gehalt*] (*Tb2*, 148). That is how it facilitates the transition to the one pole of language, i.e., nothingness, while the transition to the absolute pole on the other side, symbolizing the transition to revelation, is unattainable in Scholem’s eyes.

The metaphysics of language in “On Lament and Lamentation” seems to be rather original, since it grew out of Scholem’s work of translating Hebrew laments. But in reality, this metaphysics is not original at all, since it is evident that Scholem has taken over basic assumptions from Chaim Nachman Bialik’s conception of language. In 1915 and 1916 Scholem, whose knowledge of He-

brew at that time was still rather weak, worked on translating Bialik's poems. On 25 December 1915, he wrote in his diary: "Bialik is great, since our hopes are great. He honors our hopes. As far as I am able to, I translated Bialik" (*Tb1*, 214). Bialik's monumental poem *ha-Matmid* ("The diligent scholar of Talmud") was for Scholem a representation of the existence he aspired to, since he sought to transform his life into that of a permanently diligent student of Jewish tradition. On 18 January 1916, he notes: "*ha-Matmid* is indeed very, very beautiful. It is so totally Bialik that only by reading it, one knows in what the greatness of Bialik consists" (*Tb1*, 245). A verse from this poem (Bialik 1926, 45–62), "Beautiful is a life full of pains for the Torah," figures as a motto for Scholem's conception of Zionism.

But also anticipated in Bialik's poems is Scholem's metaphysics of language. Regarding his poems Ernst Simon, Bialik's biographer, writes that in their premonition of death they are imbued with silence: "The content of Bialik's poetry becomes formal insofar as it constitutes silence as its major content" (Simon 1935, 94). In his essay, "Veiling and Revelation in Language" (1915), Bialik points out the dark background of all language: "If we would undertake to lay bare the true, the innermost core of all words and systems we would in the end come to nothing else but to a single word that is all encompassing [...] the nothingness" (Simon 1935, 11). In this sentence the opposite of revelation bears the same name as in Scholem's theoretical definition of the language of lament. However, "nothingness" is experienced by Bialik as a threat, as "chaos," and as the "infinite sea of the darkness of the world," while for Scholem it definitely carries a positive accent, since it is not tainted by the Fall. In his philosophical system, "nothingness" is the origin of all language and, in later years, it even becomes the ultimate ground of his mystical conception of God.

In stating that "nothingness" is the "origin" of language, Scholem introduces a term adopted from Walter Benjamin's writings. For Benjamin, the word "origin" [*Urpsrung*], as used in the title of his *Habilitationsschrift* on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, signifies a phenomenon that escapes the contingencies of history and thus denotes, already in its beginnings, its innermost essence. Nothingness, considered as the origin of language, implies that language in its innermost core proceeds from nothing, is nothing. The adoption and transformation of Benjamin's terminology is even more evident in the central sentence of Scholem's epilogue to his translation of Hebrew laments: "The expression of innermost expressionlessness, the language of silence is lament" (*Tb2*, 131). In his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin defined "expressionlessness" [*Ausdruckslosigkeit*] as the decisive moment in which the appearance of beauty is destroyed in a work of art and "the sublime violence of

the true appears" (SW1, 340). For Scholem, lament turns into "the expression of expressionlessness" insofar as language in lament annihilates its objects – and thus itself. As such, it reflects that nothingness is the origin of language.

It is obvious that Scholem was conscious of being dependent on Walter Benjamin. That is why he can claim, with regard to "On Lament and Lamentation," that "the continuation of [Benjamin's] work on language is thus undertaken, by me" (Tb2, 88). In fact, Benjamin had tried to define the concept of pure language in his essay "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." There he considers pure language to be different from human language, which designates objects and is a tool of communication. In Benjamin's commentary on the first chapter of Genesis he discovers in it the language of Adam, which constitutes pure cognition through the assigning of names. But even human language, according to Benjamin's speculations, contains an extreme point at which the boundary with the linguistic level immediately above it can be crossed. This boundary-point is the name. Through the name, human language takes part in Adamic language, which embodies "the intensive totality of language" (*Language*, 65). Thus the name is for Benjamin a linguistic borderline phenomenon, albeit a positive one, whereas for Scholem "lament is nothing other than a language on the border, language of the border itself" (*Lament*, 313) and therefore represents "absolutely nothing positive," since it marks the transition from human language to silence.

Scholem's theory of language works similarly to Benjamin's as a commentary on a canonical text – namely, on the Biblical laments. But at the same time Scholem tries to outdo his older friend by citing a sentence from Benjamin's "On Language as Such," "Language as such is the mental being of man" (*Language*, 65), and then adding: "But here language has to encompass silence" (Tb2, 158). Whereas Benjamin's conception of God is oriented toward the Jewish tradition, Scholem, by exalting silence and nothingness, moves toward a mystical, heretical conception of God, akin to what he will find later on in the Kabbalah. By an existentialist pathos formulated *avant la lettre*, he makes clear what this transformation will mean for the life of each individual: "The presence of death is the center of each human life in its pure order. That means that death stands in the metaphysical middle of each life" (Tb2, 180).

Thus, Scholem's epilogue, with its reflections on the language of lament, is not only a continuation of Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such." In this context there is, as he himself concedes, "almost nobody on the whole earth who can understand it in its totality" (Tb2, 88). But the epilogue is – as Scholem explicitly states – an expression of the situation of the actual stage of his life: "The work on lament has to be considered as a description of the inner state of my mind. Anyone who does not understand it in this context must be

deserted by God. And such it is, that is what constitutes its significance, the fact that I managed in it to express my glowing hot inner state through the quiet language of theory. Therefore it is eternal truth" (*Tb2*, 149).

What is this "glowing hot inner state"? On this point, Scholem's *Diaries* are more than eloquent. At the time when Scholem was saying farewell to Buber and the Jewish Youth movement, Walter Benjamin entered his life as its new guiding star. As he writes in retrospect in a letter to a girlfriend, which he copied in his diary: "I had the greatest experience of my life: coming into close relationship with a human being of absolute, marvelous greatness. He has had the deepest influence on my life" (*Tb2*, 54). It is treacherous that he uses, without thinking about it, the Buberian word "experience" [*Erlebnis*] here. It is even more treacherous that of this man – no Zionist, Scholem declares, and someone who possibly had approached Judaism only through Scholem's own influence – he can write: "In him the deepest, the absolute Judaism spoke out" (*Tb2*, 54).

This hyperbolic statement is how Scholem characterizes Walter Benjamin, the philosophy student seven years his senior, who quickly became his new friend. It is obviously less Benjamin's closeness to Judaism that provoked Scholem's enthusiasm than Scholem's own infatuation with Benjamin, repeatedly evident in his diaries and letters from 1917–1918. In November 1917 Benjamin had sent Scholem a copy of his critique of Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, in which Benjamin uses the literary text as a pretext for mourning the end of the youth movement: "Dostoyevsky's great act of lamentation in this novel is for the failure of the youth movement" (*SW1*, 80). Scholem had interpreted this essay, in a letter to Benjamin, as an "esoteric utterance" about the suicide of Fritz Heinle, Benjamin's friend from his active days in the youth movement. Heinle had taken his life in desperation at the outbreak of World War I. In his response Benjamin, in a letter written for Scholem's twentieth birthday, was full of enthusiasm about Scholem's remark: "It is as if I entered a festive time and I have to honor the revelation in what has been revealed to you" (Scholem 1976, 104). On receiving this letter, three days after he had completed "On Lament and Lamentation," Scholem could not contain his happiness: "These ten lines restore the health of my life. Walter, dear Walter, I thank you from my innermost heart" (*Tb2*, 91).

In his *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (1975), Scholem mentions "a strong emotional element" in his relationship with Benjamin (*WSF*, 49). This statement is relatively subdued compared to what the reality of his feelings had been. The documents of the years 1917 and 1918 clearly speak another language. Time and again, the young man mentions his yearning as he waits for a letter from the beloved man; or he expresses his wish to write him "an

unending letter, in which I could pour out the full content of my life that nobody understands" (*Tb2*, 170). He compares his friend to Lao Tzu and Hölderlin and calls him "a prophet of God" (*Tb2*, 146). He perceives what happens between them to be evidence of a "pre-established harmony," and on 22 February 1918, he concedes unequivocally: "I love Walter" (*Tb2*, 138).

The tone of these enthusiastic declarations of love is upended and turned inside out after May 1918, when Scholem moved from Jena to Bern, where he lived close to Dora and Walter Benjamin. At this point, Dora tries to make him understand that "he doesn't know Walter at all" (*Tb2*, 243). Now he has to realize that the letter in which he had written about a "pre-established harmony in our lives, was one of my biggest errors" (*Tb2*, 246). Scholem is desperate, "looking into the nameless abyss which has opened in myself" (*Tb2*, 249). The disappointment speaking out of these lines is so great that he thinks about taking his life. He considers himself to be someone who has bought his silence by the certitude of committing suicide in the near future. "Since death is my bedfellow, I have become aware of unheard-of things" (*Tb2*, 267).

One can only speculate about the reasons for this turnaround in Scholem's mood. It is certainly important that Scholem can now observe the everyday life of the couple and discover that it does not match his high expectations. He is witness to loud, abusive altercations between the couple. He is faced with the realization that they are "more philistine than the Philistines"; thus he calls their life a lie (*Tb2*, 262). On top of this, mutual jealousy creates constant tension between him and Dora.

Scholem's contemplation of suicide had less to do with his disappointed infatuation than with his wish to approach, once and forever, the adored idol. In his understanding, the teachings that had turned his friend into a "prophet of God" had not been transmitted to Benjamin via the Jewish tradition, but by Fritz Heinle, "his dead friend. With him he saw what the essence of youth is: with him he saw at the same time how youth dies" (*Tb2*, 82). In the face of the failure of the youth movement, which Scholem also experienced intensely, he desired to become a second Fritz Heinle and therefore, like him, a "teacher" of Walter Benjamin. Sacrificial death, a very Christian idea! Scholem himself pointed out this correlation: "Dying in a Jewish manner means to suffer one's death as a teaching. Therefore only Christ has died in a Jewish manner" (*Tb2*, 211).

Suicide is the last radical consequence of the solitude into which Scholem retired, in accord with his idiosyncratic conception of Zionism. It is also an expression of his subjective feelings, justifying the theory of language that he deduced from his analysis of lament. In this sense, the transgression of human language into silence and nothingness finds its existential fulfillment in the

project of suicide. As Scholem states, “The presence of death is the center of human life in its pure order” (*Tb*2, 180). One could understand Scholem’s mapping out of his life as an early realization of the existentialism proposed ten years later in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and its formula of assuming one’s own death.

However, grounds for Scholem’s utopian project are nowhere to be found within the Jewish tradition. On the contrary, the constitution of “*goij kaddosh*,” of the holy people, is based on obedience toward the laws of Torah and the fulfillment of the ritual prescriptions. This in turn presupposes communication via language and cannot be achieved through silence. That is why the content and form of the oral teachings of Judaism are based on the principle of dialogue. Scholem’s silent learning of Hebrew, on the other hand, unconsciously follows the formula of “solitude and freedom” with which Wilhelm von Humboldt reformed the methods of academic studies in Prussian universities. Thus, the rebel who resisted the paternal, assimilationist milieu and directed his attention to Eastern European Judaism and Jewish mysticism remained deeply embedded in the methods of nineteenth-century German cultural science; and he continued on this path, making philology his preferred tool for analyzing the Kabbalah. His antinomian stand made him blind to the truth to be found in the orthodox tradition of Judaism.

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- Lament* Gershom Scholem. Translation first published here (see pp. 313–319) of Scholem’s “Über Klage und Klagelied.” 1917–1918. *Tb*2 128–133.
- Language* Walter Benjamin. “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man.” *SW*1 62–74. Trans. by Edmond Jephcott of “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen.” 1916. In *GS*2. 62–74.
- SW* Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. 4 vols. Michael Jennings et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1996–2003.
- Tb* Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.
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## Section Five: **The Poetry of Lament**



Sigrid Weigel

# The Role of Lamentation for Scholem's Theory of Poetry and Language

## 1 The smuggling of poetry into the œuvre of a historian of Kabbalah

At least<sup>1</sup> since the appearance in 1966 of the two-volume edition of Walter Benjamin's letters, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, we have known that Scholem, esteemed as a historian of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah, occasionally wrote poetry. Embedded within notes on letters by another author in that edition were two poems by Scholem: (1) "Greeting from the Angelus" (Benjamin 1966, 1:269), written in 1921 as a birthday gift for Benjamin and marking Scholem's viewing of Paul Klee's hand-colored ink drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920); one strophe of the poem had been known before 1966, Benjamin having incorporated it into his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940) as a citation and motto for his thought-image of the angel of history.<sup>2</sup> (2) A longer poem, "With a Copy of Kafka's 'Trial,'" written in 1934, which Scholem sent Benjamin during a debate in letter form about the correct interpretation of Kafka.<sup>3</sup> On 22 March 1935, the poem was published in the *Jüdische Rundschau*,<sup>4</sup> the same publication where parts of Benjamin's Kafka essay had appeared in late 1934.<sup>5</sup>

As far as I am aware, Scholem did not publish any other poems, with the exception of some verses that appeared in the context of his journalistic engagement in the Jewish youth movement during the World War I period, and some translations. In his later writing, we do find scattered hints and allusions suggesting that the *Angelus* and Kafka poems represented only the few published examples of a previously unknown area of his writing. For example, in

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1 This is a shortened and translated version of a German essay published in Mosès and Weigel 2000, 16–47. For a thematically related publication, see Weigel 2013.

2 For the role of the *Angelus* in the relationship between Benjamin and Scholem, see Weigel 2008, 215 ff.

3 Benjamin 1966, 2:237.

4 When Benjamin wrote to Scholem on 20 July 1934 that "to my joy we will now appear together in the *Jüdische Rundschau*," he was alluding to plans for this publication. See Benjamin and Scholem 1980, 160.

5 Benjamin 1966, 1:269 and 2:237.

Scholem's account of his friendship with Walter Benjamin (WSF), we find a clear pointer to a more-than-negligible poetic output. At the end of his remarkable correspondence with Benjamin's wife, Dora, carried out in the shared period in Bern "in the mask of letters ... exchanged between the infant Stefan and myself," we read: "In those days I wrote quite a few poems, including one for Benjamin's birthday, which I left out for him along with the two books I gave him" (WSF, 70). This passage could be read as an indication that Scholem wanted readers to know that he might "still have" other extant poems to reveal to them; but if such readers were hoping to discover such poems, these hopes were disappointed, at least during Scholem's lifetime. Similarly, in a letter of 29 October 1973 to his publisher Unseld, Scholem comments on the death of Ingeborg Bachmann and noted: "Among her papers should be a longer poem I sent her as a response to her notes on the Rome ghetto."<sup>6</sup> Penned in 1967, these verses addressed to Bachmann would be published only in 1984, two years after Scholem's death, together with four other poems of his, written between 1926 and 1942, in the Israeli journal *Hadarim* (the German originals accompanied by Shimon Sandbank's translations [Scholem 1984]).<sup>7</sup> In any event, the publication of these poems was hardly noted in Europe or the United States.<sup>8</sup>

While the remark in the letter to Unseld shows how well Scholem recalled his own poems, it is also the sign of a complicated relationship with them, marked both by concealment and a wish to have them known. The older Scholem presented himself several times as an author who would not have objected to his poems being published. Although he made no attempt to do so under his own name, he did not mind having his poems reach the public (or potentially reach it) under the auspices of *another's* work. Here we find a remarkable analogy to the dialectic of openness and secrecy, concealment and disclosure [*Preisgabe*], which Scholem described as a central feature of the tradition of Kabbalah and tradition.<sup>9</sup> I am about to closely consider Scholem's poetic theory, but I do so not to salvage his poems as an unjustly forgotten portion of his oeuvre. Rather, I wish first and foremost to inquire into this genre's locus with-

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<sup>6</sup> Gershom Scholem archives, manuscript and archival division, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Arc 4° 1599/2771.

<sup>7</sup> On this poem, see Weigel 1999, 5–15.

<sup>8</sup> In 2003 an English edition of twenty-one of Scholem's poems was published (see Scholem 2003). An edition of the poems in their original language remains a desideratum to this day, to be rectified through an upcoming edition highlighting the "literary Scholem" by the Berlin Center for Literary and Cultural Research, forthcoming 2014–2017.

<sup>9</sup> In Hebrew, *kabbalah* literally means "tradition" or "receiving." Scholem most succinctly discusses the Kabbalah in terms of a hidden tradition in Scholem 1970a.

in a body of writing that is itself situated between philology and historiography, in which we find an encounter between highly varied ways of writing and rhetorical forms: translations, historiography, criticism, theses, essays, polemics, letters, diaries, autobiographical texts, and poems. In any case, that his poetic texts are to be considered merely peripheral literary products – as it were, the poetic abjecta of a scholar's oeuvre – is to be questioned on grounds of their steady emergence, over a period of six decades (1915–1974). Scholem's hidden poetry is a symptom for the still not fully acknowledged literary palimpsest of Scholem's work; it issued from his reading and translating sacred verses such as the book of Lamentations and the dirge. But a suitable critical assessment of this side of his work first requires the acknowledgment of another context, i.e., the significance he himself accorded to poetry in his linguistic theory and his studies of Jewish tradition.

## 2a Kabbalist linguistic theory: on the end of Kabbalah in poetry

Reflection on language and writing naturally plays a central role in Scholem's studies of Jewish mysticism, since these are organized around the core problem of how language can express an experience with no adequate analogy in the world from which language emerges (Scholem 1941, 3 ff.). Here the late essay "The Name of God and the Language Theory of the Kabbalah" (Scholem 1972; German original: Scholem 1970b) represents the point in Scholem's historical work on the Kabbalah where he focuses most pronouncedly on questions of linguistic theory, his starting points being the concept of mystical revelation and the question of the comprehensibility of the word of God *within* human language. Bringing together longstanding, haphazardly developed reflections on language,<sup>10</sup> and maintaining a secret tie with the Kafka-cipher at the end of the "Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah," (Scholem 1970a),<sup>11</sup> this essay can also be read as a concealed theory of poetry. At its end, concluding a description of different mystic doctrines and movements and their linguistic conception, Scholem formulates the central concepts at work in his own lin-

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<sup>10</sup> See Mosès 1992, chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>11</sup> In the tenth of these "unhistorical aphorisms," Kafka is presented as a descendent of Kabbalah, read as a non-expressible tradition: "For this reason, for many present-day readers his texts, the secularized representation of a (to him unknown) Kabbalist feeling for the world, have something of the rigorous luster of the canonical – of the complete that ruptures."

guistic theory of Kabbalah; he here speaks of a connection between poets and the Kabbalist masters. “In our time,” he observes, “only poets” could offer an answer to the question of the dignity of a language from which God has withdrawn. He here emphasizes both what unites and separates mystics and poets. “For poets do not share the doubt that most mystics have in regard to language. And poets have one link with the masters of the Kabbala, even when they reject Kabbalistic theological formulation as being still too emphatic. This link is their belief in language as an absolute, which is as if constantly flung open by dialectics. It is their belief in the mystery of language which has become audible” (Scholem 1972, 194).

This argument for a common belief in the mystery of language shared by Kabbalists and poets is tied to Scholem’s reflections on the falling silent of tradition. Tradition, he indicates, can shift into a “soft, panting whisper”; but in times “like our own,” an era “in which it can no longer be handed down” (Scholem 1972, 194), it can simply fall silent. This process is not to be understood as the onset of simple factual silence. Rather, what falls silent is that moment in language denoting the absence of meaning from which all meaning emerges, projecting itself into time: “The name of God is the ‘essential name,’ which is the original source of all language” (Scholem 1972, 193). The meaninglessness of the name of God, “this element which projects over and beyond meaning, but which in the first instance enables meaning to be given [...] which endows every other form of meaning, though it has no meaning itself” (Scholem 1972, 194), points to its position at the center of revelation. But the word of God “is infinitely liable to interpretation, and it is reflected in our own language” (Scholem 1972, 194). What we have gathered from it, we read, are less messages than calls, in that the semantic level of language only refers to the hidden, non-communicable word of God. “That which has meaning – sense and form – is not this word itself, but the *tradition* behind this word, its communication and reflection in time” (Scholem 1972, 194; my.emphasis). Tradition is thus here defined as a movement in time, as a verbally materialized and manifested history, so to speak, and as the semantic trace of something in itself possessing no meaning: as, then, a generation of meaning from an originary lack of meaning, marked by the name and locus of God. The falling silent of tradition, the vanishing of mystery, a language from which God has withdrawn: these here serve as synonyms for a loss of what in any event always remains hidden in the declarative, signficatory dimension of language, what can never be fixed within it. “In our times” it can only be salvaged by poets, with “their belief in the mystery of language which has become audible” (Scholem 1972, 194). This “central thought” at the end of Scholem’s text again takes up the question posed – in clear reference to Benjamin’s early theory of

language magic – in the first section regarding the “interior side of language”: that aspect of language moving beyond communication as an “expression of something that can be expressed.”<sup>12</sup> But he now reformulates this aspect of language in relation to the position that God's name takes at the center of revelation.

## 2b Excursus on Benjamin's and Scholem's Theories of Language

In this manner Scholem's Kabbalist theory of language places itself in relation to Benjamin's theory as a continuation that in a sense simultaneously translates it back: by returning to a point before Benjamin's transformation of his philosophy of language, as formulated in his 1916 essay's reading of Genesis, into a cultural history of the mimetic capacity, as set forth in his 1933 essay “The Doctrine of Similarity.” Through this process of translation, Scholem reconstructs the register of Kabbalist, religious language theory from which Benjamin's concept of “paradisiacal language” emerges. This complicated position vis-à-vis Benjamin's theory of language does not negate Scholem's clear proximity to it, above all evident as a structural analogy: in Benjamin's earlier theory of language magic as well, history and meaning (in the sense of something communicable) are presented as having the same origin – a caesura separating human language from the sphere of divine creation.<sup>13</sup> But whereas for Scholem something lacking meaning, the name of God, marks the origin – as indicated, the condition for the possibility of meaning – Benjamin emphasizes the figure of a caesura in which paradisiacal language, as a language that is “completely cognizant” and at the same time is one that names, is replaced by a judging,

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12 Benjamin puts it as follows in his essay on language, “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man”: “Language is in any case not only communication of what can be communicated but at the same time a symbol of what cannot be communicated” (*Sprache*, 156). Benjamin's centrally placed Hamann citation, “language – the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega,” also surfaces in Scholem's theory of language and Kabbalah. See Scholem 1970a, 9.

13 In his short essay “The Meaning of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” (“Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie,” GS2.1, 139) Benjamin puts it as follows: “History and Meaning appear together and at the same time in human language”; the “Fall from grace of the linguistic spirit” at the center of the language essay (*Sprache*, esp. 153 ff.) is defined as the beginning of a historical existence and a genuine human language.



distinguishing language: by a form of indirect or mediate (i.e., sign-based) communication.

Hence whereas the “central thought” in Scholem’s language theory is lack of meaning as an origin, in his figure of loss Benjamin presumes the antecedence of a “completely cognizant” language. In any event the difference between the two conceptions is not reducible to a distinction between originary semantic absence and originary cognitive abundance: for Scholem as well, the absence of meaning from the divine name is grounded in an abundance, God’s name being both infinitely interpretable and without fixed meaning. Rather, we can understand the difference as one of perspective: Benjamin’s reading of Genesis leads, as has been suggested, to a perspective that is anthropological, a history of mimetic capacity characterized by changes to the magical aspects of language in the course of human development; for Scholem, in contrast, the problem of “our time,” the falling silent of tradition, amounts to a vanishing of a scene of reading whose history he reconstructs in “The Name of God.” What Scholem postulates in that essay is a continuum between Kabbalistic texts and the position within them of the name of God. “For the Kabbalists,” he writes, “this name has no ‘meaning’ in the traditional understanding of the term. It has no *concrete* signification” (Scholem 1972, 193 ff.; my emphasis). But as found in their respective language theories Benjamin’s and Scholem’s reflections structurally embody the same model: language’s semantic dimension – as already cited from Scholem, “what has meaning, sense and form”; what in “The Doctrine of Similarity” Benjamin terms the “semiotic side” of language (GS2.1, 208) – consists of the inventory of inherited language, which refers to the incommunicable articulated in and with it, designated as mystery by Scholem and as magic or non-sensory similarity by Benjamin.

The difference we can observe in the framework of this structural analogy between the two friends’ theories is apparent in the symbolic fields they try to create in their texts: the dominance of either an acoustic or a visual phenomenology. In Benjamin’s doctrine of similarity, the ephemeral status of non-sensory similarities is mainly encapsulated in images of flashing light, even when the reference is to phonetic similarities, as in the following: “In this way the context of meaning located in the sentence’s sounds is the stock from which similar things can, in lightning-like fashion, momentarily come to light from a sound” (GS2.1, 209). But since Benjamin sets the perception of such non-sensory similarities in the context of a theory of reading – a reading before any language – the fleetingly flaring, magical aspects of language, whether referring to acoustic or visual perceptions, are for him in the end moments in which things are written. His theory is concerned above all with their readability; for this reason everything becomes “provocative [*erregend*] writing” within them

(GS1.1, 352). When Scholem speaks of “the echo of the vanished word of the creation” (Scholem 1972, 194), in his own Kabbalistic theory of language, or when in the above-cited passages he refers to the “mystery of language which has become audible,” then his language theory appears, by contrast, to be stamped by acoustical elements, by word and by voice. The question here emerges of Scholem's view of the relationship of audible things to writing.

In his essay “The Voiced Text of the Torah,” Moshe Idel concludes that “it seems that Scholem, a famous scholar of Kabbalah, preferred the written over the oral form of language, under the influence of the classical kabbalistic axiology concerning language, as we have tried to explain it in this essay” (Idel 1994, 165). He considers the ecstatic and Chassidic movements emerging in the course of the Kabbalah's history, in order to work out a shift from a preference for writing to a preference for voice, “from the emphasis on visualization to pronunciation.” (Idel 1994, 161). Now Idel's presumption of a partiality on Scholem's part for what is written emerges from a paradigm that approaches internal differences within a particular history of mysticism, which is to say various movements and concepts of language within Kabbalist history, in terms of a preferential opposition: writing and visual expressions as modes to be preferred are set against speech and acoustics.<sup>14</sup> But this schema cannot easily be applied to Scholem's historiographical account of mysticism, which on the one hand distinguishes between a light-centered and language-centered mysticism, while on the other hand differentiates the relationship between speech and writing in the description of language-mystical movements. Scholem's own, Kabbalah-centered linguistic theory cannot be grasped in terms of internal oppositions within the history of mysticism, situated as it is within the transition between mysticism and poetry (as a form of secularized mysticism), or, more precisely, on the threshold between mysticism and literary modernity. The complex relationship between voice and writing manifested in key passages of his Kabbalist language-theory does not so much point to a decision meant to be taken between competing mystical concepts of language as itself figure a constellation describing the end of mysticism *within* literature – thus having Kabbalist language-theory end in, so to speak, a messianic constellation.

In actuality, Scholem's theory of language is manifested as the theory of *writing*, in which the trace of a mystery points to the absence of a *voice* tied to

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<sup>14</sup> Idel refers here to Scholem's “Confession Regarding our Language” (“Bekenntnis über unsere Sprache,” 1926). In this text, the focus is less on the transition from written to spoken Hebrew than the problem of the secularization of an originally sacral language. See below, section 5.

the withdrawal of the divine name from the realm of the pronounceable and acoustic, a retreat in which “the name, by which God calls himself and which is used to utter invocations, withdraws from the acoustic sphere and becomes *unpronounceable*” (Scholem 1972, 67; my emphasis), with this non-pronounceability taking in the possibility of addressing while excluding that of, precisely, expressing or pronouncing. Formulated in terms of language theory, the echo of this addressability without expressibility would be: tradition. The falling silent of tradition would then consist in nothing other than a vanishing of mystery or of the indecipherable from language: the dying out of *that* trace or echo and the emergence of a language of total communication, pure *informatio*, resisted by all poetic language. Writing as a cradle of mystery for the Kabbalists (Scholem 1972, 167); the name that communicates nothing but itself (Scholem 1972, 70); a dialectic of infinite interpretability and the absence of fixed meaning: these are the elements establishing an explicit connection between poetry and Kabbalah for Scholem in 1970, when he summed up his studies on the history of Kabbalah. In this manner, we should understand his theory of language as being, at the same time, literary theory.<sup>15</sup> While within it literature is connected to decipherment and to readings, the world-field of voices in this text – for example the call, the echo, the *audible* mystery, the whisper, the falling silent – recalls the withdrawal, tied to the name of God, from the acoustic sphere. But at the same time, it recalls a concept of poetry that over fifty years earlier Scholem had tied to an entirely different linguistic origin. Whereas in 1970 his description of the end of Kabbalah culminated in a theory of poetic language, in 1918 he had derived the emergence of poetry from the lament and the dirge. With this derivation, the literary or poetic elements in Scholem’s thinking designate precisely a departure from purely historiographical knowledge, and a moving past the hermeticism of a purely scientific notion of mysticism. We need to now consider the significance of this moment for Scholem’s oeuvre as a whole.

### 3 The emergence of poetry from lament – Scholem’s poetology

In 1918, when young Scholem’s engagement with Jewish tradition began to focus on the Kabbalah, he did not, in fact, tie poetry to Kabbalistic texts but

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<sup>15</sup> In this framework Scholem’s linguistic theory has rightfully been tied to a semantic theory of *différance*. See Idel 1996, 29–46. A closer comparison between the concept of writing in Derrida’s *Grammatology* and theories of linguistic mysticism remains a desideratum. Such a

rather with lament and dirge or lamentation [*kinah*]. An unpublished note from the Scholem archive, entitled "On Lament and Lamentation" and dated January 1918, appears to present his earliest cohesively formulated theory of language.<sup>16</sup> The text is one of many unpublished notes and essays found in the archive; a considerable number of these treat linguistic and literary themes. We thus need to discover not only Scholem the secret poet but also Scholem the literary critic and linguistic theorist.

The division of language into two spheres – the sphere of what is "revealed, expressed [*Offenbaren, Aussprechlichen*]," and that of what is "symbolized, silenced [*das Verschwiegene*]" (*Lament*, 314)<sup>17</sup> – already forms the basis for the "Lament and Lamentation" essay, which reflects the period of Scholem's most intense communication with Benjamin during their years in Bern. Scholem here assumes that language is in general infinite in that it extends over both realms; but this is not the case for the lament, as it is located on the border between the realms and thus constitutes a border language. Scholem thus discusses lamentation by considering its position vis-à-vis both realms, initially that of the "revealed, expressible." We here read: "In lament [*in der Klage*] nothing is expressed and everything is implied. Lament is the only possible (and in a unique way, really actualized) volatile [*labile*] language." (*Lament*, 313). While this definition indicates that here as well the concern is with a negation of what is expressed, it nevertheless stands in an entirely different relationship to revelation than does the non-significance of the divine name: not at the center of revelation but in juxtaposition to it. That is, we should not consider lamentation to be standing in opposition to a language of exultation or joy; rather, Scholem defines it as standing in opposition to revelation. Consequently, he sees revelation and lamentation as functioning like the birth and destruction of language, its moments of becoming and dying away: "For if revelation means the stage at which each language is absolutely positive and expresses nothing more than the positivity of the linguistic world – the birth of language (not its origin!) – then lament is precisely the stage at which each

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study would above all need to pay attention to the different loci for the divine word and the voice.

**16** The text of Scholem's "Über Klage und Klagelied" is an eighteen-page handwritten ms. dated "January 1918," Scholem archive, Arc. 4° 1599/277-II/20. First published in *Tb2*, 128–133; translated by Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel as "On Lament and Lamentation" in this volume.

**17** In Scholem's history of mysticism as well, the symbol is "something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication" (Scholem 1941, 26–27). The symbol is thus an expression of what is concealed, while as something that can be expressed, what is revealed "expresses nothing more than the positivity of the linguistic world" (*Lament*, 314).

language suffers death in a truly tragic sense" (*Lament*, 314). Importantly, language's suffering of death is not a one-time event but rather a figure of repetition – "language in the state [*Beschaffenheit*] of lamentation" is here considered the "actual tragic point" at which language extinguishes itself, with the infinity of lamentation resulting from the symbol's repeated efforts and their failure. In this way, lamentation describes something like a repeated moment in which the symbolic dimension of meaning dies away. In addition, there is no answer to lamentation but silence; the only being who can respond to it is "God Himself" (*Lament*, 316). At the same time, it is "God himself, who through revelation evoked it [i.e., lament] out of the revolution of mourning," as Scholem then puts it.

Scholem here develops the relationship of lamentation to the other realm of language, the realm of "what is symbolized, silenced," by way of mourning, which he refers to as a "mental being [*geistiges Wesen*] whose language is lament is *mourning*," (*Lament*, 315).<sup>18</sup> But while mourning, as a state of things or a condition, belongs completely to the realm of the symbolic, the concealed, and the speechless, lamentation is characterized by being "a completely unsymbolic language." (*Lament*, 317). But in that lamentation symbolizes mourning, Scholem characterizes it – since there can be no symbol of a symbol – as something that "was both object and symbol but now in annihilation signifies infinite nothingness, the null of degree infinite [*die Null vom Grade Unendlich*]: the expressionless, the extinguished." In this manner, lamentation is conceived as a very complex figure: as the death of language in the form of a repetitive movement of its extinction oriented toward the symbol; as a repeated articulation in which anything symbolic dies out or is extinguished.

Tied to this definition are both the problem of translation (of dirges into another language) and the riddle of transmission: the capacity of lamentation to be carried down by tradition is the "truly mystic laws of the peoplehood [*Volkstum*]" (*Lament*, 317). At the same time, the constellation provides a basis for the emergence of a form of poetry from lamentation. "Every lamentation can be addressed as poetry," states Scholem, an argument that he will then comment on in terms of the *kinah*'s concrete features. He observes, "There is hardly any other word in human languages that cries and falls silent more than

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<sup>18</sup> It would be interesting to compare the theory of mourning and the paradox of the tragic presented in Scholem's essay with Benjamin's essay "The Meaning of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," which sketches a "path from the natural sound via lamentation to music" (GS2.1, 138). Lamentation represents a hidden trace in Benjamin's early linguistic theory, above all in connection with "dumb nature," with muteness and mourning being nearly equated (GS2.1, 155).

the Hebrew word *איכה* (*eikhah*) [how], with which the dirges begin.” (*Lament*, 317). The word *eikhah*, [“how?”] is the initial word of chapters one, two, and four of *Eikhah*, the Hebrew bible’s book of Lamentations (traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah). For Scholem,

The infinite tension that inflames each word of lament, as if to make it cry – there is hardly any other word in human languages that cries and falls silent more than the Hebrew word *איכה* (*eikhah*) [how], with which the dirges begin – the infinite force with which each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence, in which the word’s emptiness [*Leere*] becomes teaching [*Lehre*], but above all the infinity of mourning itself, which destroys itself in lament as rhythm, prove lament to be poetry (*Lament*, 317).

He then turns to individual formal elements of *kinah* supporting his thesis: the lamentation’s monotony, which is the only quality that in the end adheres and is thus the only symbolic element; the inviolability of the rhythm in face of the word; the poetic form of most lamentations in the Hebrew bible’s later literature, including for instance acrostics (verses beginning with alphabetically sequential letters), which Scholem describes as a magic form within which the infinity of language is captured. In the final paragraphs, Scholem summarizes his reflections on Jewish tradition. We here read that with the overcoming of myth and the forbidding of magic, Judaism could incorporate lamentation into itself. “In this way, the Hebrew *kinah* arose,” he comments (*Lament*, 318) – poetry, then, from lamentation.

If we compare the linguistic theory laid out in this essay with the later theory of language present in Scholem’s writings on the Kabbalah, then the earlier theory seems an inversion of the later, as if formulated from an inverse locus. In the later case, inception as the birth of poetry and tradition from a figure of extinction; in the former case, the reflection on an end against which poets are deployed, as salvation. And while with Scholem’s theme of an impossible response to lamentation, poetic theory of the dirge is addressed *to* God, in his linguistic theory of the Kabbalah the focus is on the question whether the echo of God’s name, the address *through* God, who has withdrawn from language, is still being heard: whether an echo of the divine voice still resounds in reading. Whereas in this text we are confronted with the falling silent of a tradition in which infinite meaning emerges from the center of a lack of meaning, in the earlier text the concern is with the constitution of a tradition from both rhythm and the repetition of an extinction – which is thus located in a primarily acoustic sphere. The common denominator for the two texts is the addressing and extinction of the word, in 1970 tied to a historical moment of danger, in 1918 to a repeated linguistic event. And while in 1970 *poets* are conjured up as guardians of knowledge and mystery, in 1918 *poetry* emerges

from the transmission of an extinction of words. In this way, in the course of his research on the Kabbalah, Scholem's theory of language shifted from an emphatic theory of poetry to a reflection on the potential task of poets alongside the Kabbalists.

## 4 Translation of dirges and critique of translation

Thematically and temporally, Scholem's "On Lament and Lamentation" is connected to his own translations of dirges, undertaken at a time when he was applying himself mainly to the study of ancient texts, Hebrew, and the question of the possibility or impossibility of translation. Scholem's translations – I am familiar with his version (1915) of the Song of Songs, subtitled "Biblical Hebrew Love Poetry" [*Altthebräische Liebeslyrik*],<sup>19</sup> the five chapters of Lamentations (1918),<sup>20</sup> some Hanukah hymns (1917) (Scholem 1994, 214), a medieval Hebrew dirge (1919) (Scholem 1919–1920), and two Sabbath hymns by the medieval Spanish Jewish poet Yehuda Halevi (1923) (Scholem 1923) – are in my view among the finest things that he wrote in German.<sup>21</sup> In the framework of his earlier poetic theory, derived as explained from the language of lamentation, we would need to consider these translations and not Scholem's own poems as his true poetic work. When we compare his translations of Biblical texts with his other translations, it becomes clear that Scholem, who once referred to himself as a "specialist in Lamentations" (letter to Ernst Simon, 12 May 1926, Scholem 1994, 233), was striving for a conversion of Biblical songs that had been transformed into prose (for instance in the Luther translation) back into fixed poetic language. That is, he wished to reverse the process through which these songs had been integrated into a mythic narration. In addition, literalism and replication of rhythm were both important for him, though the texts should not be subjected to forced rhyme or metrical constriction. In view of Benjamin's theory of translation (Benjamin 1997),<sup>22</sup> we could

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<sup>19</sup> *Das Hohe Lied: Alt-Hebräische Liebeslyrik*, published in 1916 by the press owned by his father, Arthur Scholem. Reprinted in *Tb1*, 477–491.

<sup>20</sup> Thirty-two-page handwritten ms, Scholem archive, Arc 4° 1599/277-IV/9.

<sup>21</sup> Much still needs to be explored here. The catalog of translations in the archive itself has thirty titles, mainly lamentations, with some translations from modern Hebrew literature. See Scholem archive, Arc. 4° 1599/277-IV.

<sup>22</sup> For the original German see "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1921), in *GS4.1*, 9–21.

say that in his own translations Scholem is trying to transport the German into the far reaches of a forgotten tradition's alien language, to "Hebraize" it, as it were.<sup>23</sup> As one example of the tone he arrived at, here is the beginning of *Sha'ali Serufa Ba'esh*, a mid-thirteenth-century Hebrew lamentation by Meir of Rothenburg over the burning of the Talmud in Paris in Tamuz (tenth month of the Jewish calendar) 1242:

Frage, im Feuer Verbrannte, / nach der Trauernden Wohl, / die zu wohnen verlangen /  
im Hof deiner heiligen Wohnung, / die schmachten im Staube der Erde / und leiden, /  
die verstört sind / ob des Brandes deiner Rollen, / die verdüstert gehen / und ohne Glanz /  
und hoffen auf Tageslicht, / das über ihnen erstrahle und dir – / nach dem Wohle des  
stöhnenden Menschen, / der weinet, zerbrochenen Herzens, / immer klagt / um den  
Krampf deiner Wunden, / der Klage anhebt wie Schakale und Strauße / und aufruft zur  
bitteren Trauer um dich: / Wie ward die in zehrendem Feuer gegebne / von irdischem  
Feuer verzehrt / und nicht verbrannten die Fremden an deinen Flammen. / Wie lange ...  
(Scholem 1919–1920, 283; see 340 f. in this volume for English translation)

The abandonment of strophes and syntactic logic, so that rhythm is foregrounded over the semantic units of each single verse; the parataxis of the endless lines; the frequent use of colons, marking the simultaneity of caesura and connection: these are all linguistic means through which Scholem tries to practically accommodate his theory of translation. In the accompanying commentary, he indicates that the original poem belongs to a group of lamentations known as *Zionides*,<sup>24</sup> that it displays the hard syntax of Northern French and German *piyutim* (Jewish liturgical poems), and that it is characterized by *-ayikh* as a consistent suffix-rhyme: a rhyme resting on a phonetic relationship with the canonic word of lamentation *eikhah*, thus involving a rhyme-structure with no parallel in German. "The rhyme of these poems," Scholem explains (as translated elsewhere in this volume),

is a symbol for the fundamental [*prinzipiell*] infinity of lament, and it seems that the only translation that would have a hope of making the force of these laments visible in German would be one that, instead of seeking these unreachable symbols at any price, even that of abandoning the linguistic essence of lament, aims to eliminate these symbols through

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**23** And, not coincidentally, associations here emerge with Hölderlin's procedure of turning or reversal in his translations of Greek drama. Hölderlin's name in any event functions as a kind of leitmotif in Scholem's diary entries for this year.

**24** *Zionides* are lamentations, in the tradition of Yehuda Halevi, that articulate a longing for Zion; they are chanted on Tisha b'Av (the ninth day of the month of Av) – the main day of lamentation in the Jewish calendar, commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, as well as the expulsion from Spain.



the purest possible accentuation of the words, and their inner infinite intensification. (for original German, see Scholem 1919–1920, 283n53)

Here we find a resurfacing of the symbol's extinction within the infinite tension of words (from "On Lament and Lamentation") as a translation criterion. But rather than achieving its desired end through untranslatable rhyme, the translation opts to use the rhythm of words to realize a specific movement: that of an abiding [*Halten*] within the extinction of the symbolic.<sup>25</sup> This figure, as just noted, recalls Benjamin's "The Translator's Task," where toward the essay's end we read the following: "But there is a stopping point [*ein Halten*]. It is, however, accorded only to holy scripture, in which meaning has ceased to be a watershed dividing the flow of language from the flow of revelation" (Benjamin 1997, 165). These lines appear directly after a reference to Hölderlin's Sophocles translations, where, Benjamin observes, "meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language" (Benjamin 1997, 165). For Scholem the possibility of such an abiding or stopping point is to be found above all in rhythm. In a letter to Franz Rosenzweig (7 March 1921), in which he refers among other things to his own theoretical concern with the problem of the translation of hymns, he writes of "the almost blessed richness" of Rosenzweig's translation of the blessing after meals, "and its profound harmony, plus a quality that points to something beyond expression, along with the nonmetaphorical uniformity of your stance" (Scholem 2002, 117). To describe this harmony and uniformity, a fixed moment as it were, Scholem here himself uses symbolic language and speaks of a "seal over the abyss of the religious agitation of our wretched people" (Scholem 2002, 117).

Like Benjamin, Scholem approaches translation not as a means of transmission for a given message but as form. In his 1917 essay "On the Problem of Translation from the Yiddish" (*Tb2*, 495–503), he thus describes translation as the representation of the spiritual system of a language in the sphere of an alien language determined by other systems. In the case of Yiddish, he argues, this is one of the most difficult challenges facing the translator, because three languages are actually in play:

The inner form of Yiddish, whose highest and most defining spiritual order does not come from that language itself but from Hebrew, is a representation [*Abbildung*] of the Hebrew linguistic spirit in German, which in a sense formed its material; and thus everyone who

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**25** The closeness to Benjamin's "The Translator's Task" is here especially clear. That text describes pure language as the expressionless creative word, in which "all communication, all meaning, and all intention arrive at a level where they are destined to be extinguished" (Benjamin 1997, 163). See also Scholem's remarks in *WSF*.

presently wishes to translate from Yiddish into German has to once again repeat [sic] that process of representation." (*Tb2*, 495)

What Scholem here calls the "spirit of the original" is thus essentially tied to the linguistic system of the text that needs translating. And for Scholem the linguistic system is always tied to the religious system. In this sense, he speaks in the letter to Rosenzweig of "the enormous miracle I see in the possibility of translation, one that flows in and out of the heart of religious matters [*Ordnungen*]" (Scholem 2002, 117). Scholem would explicate this problem in a detailed, differentiated manner, with respect to varying genres such as the hymn, the lamentation, and the prayer, in his extensive critique of Meir Wiener's anthology *Lyrik der Kabbalah* (Scholem 1921–1922), an essay that can be considered a monad of the Kabbalah-centered linguistic theory Scholem formulated a half-century later. In the essay, Scholem rejects both the construction of a Kabbalistic lyrical genre and procedures of translative adaptation he considers a form of false interiorization. For such adaptation, he insists, robs the text of all differentiating criteria found in the original poetry itself (Scholem 1921–1922, 57); and it (mis)understands revelation as an experience unfolding in a "sphere of interiority that remains indistinct [*verschwommen*]" (Scholem 1921–1922, 60).<sup>26</sup>

## 5 The problem of a language for our time

For Scholem, the systems determining a language have not only a spiritual but a temporal index. He made the point above all in respect to modern Hebrew, because there, the problem naturally centers on the transformation of a biblical language into a language for our time: a process usually described under the rubric of secularization. That Scholem places the term in quotation marks in "On Our Language: A Confession," (Scholem 1990, 97–99; see also "Sprache und Säkularisation," Mosès 1992, 215–234), written in 1926 in the form of a letter addressed to Rosenzweig, suggests that for him something uncanny was attached to the process, something that could turn against the speaker of the language. Scholem writes here using the first person plural ("We"), indicating that he is referring to a people in transition, the transitional locus being signaled by a pair of temporal markers, the different dates framing the text: "To Franz Rosenzweig 26. XII. 1926" at the beginning and "Jerusalem, 7 Tevet 5687"

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<sup>26</sup> See also Scholem's critique of nineteenth-century "Jewish kitschy" translations in Scholem 1963a, 154.

at the end.<sup>27</sup> I understand this text as an analysis of the illusionary structure attached to such a project, because of its assumption that the moments of revelation and religious violence innate in a holy language can be removed. “There is a belief,” states Scholem, “that the language has been secularized, its apocalyptic thorn removed” (Scholem 1990, 97; Mosès 1992, 215). He attributes this false reasoning to ghostly traits in modern colloquial Hebrew. Since, language is the same as name, in speaking words the name is invoked unintentionally – when for example, “from a speaker’s thoughtless discourse a religious *word* startles us, even if it perhaps was meant to offer solace” (Scholem 1990, 98; Mosès 1992, 216). In the horizon of Benjamin’s theory of citation, the scene being described here, the citation of a sacral language in the medium of profane usage, would constitute a form of unconscious citation, since citation means invoking the word by its name (GS2.1, 363). Scholem describes the danger tied to this process as a sort of return of the repressed, or as the breaking out again of what has been misconceived:

But another threat stands before us, more uncanny [*unheimlich*] than the Arabic people, a danger that the Zionist enterprise has necessarily invoked: What are we to think about the “modernization” [*Aktualisierung*] of Hebrew? Will not this abyss of a holy language, a language our children are steeped in, have to rise up again? Of course here we know not what we do. (Scholem 1990, 97; Mosès 1992, 215)

With his qualification of secularized language as uncanny and ghostly, Scholem assesses the religious dimension of language as something like a crypt,<sup>28</sup> a memory buried in colloquial language that “one day” will turn “the religious violence [*Gewalt*] of this language against its speakers” (Scholem 1990, 97; Mosès 1992, 215).

A note Scholem made the previous year, entitled “January 1925: The Same as Always,” illuminates the same historical constellation – and this as the problem of an immortality innate to one’s own “old language” and its concomitant difficulty of finding a place within *transient* existence. Scholem here also formulates a linguistic-historical counterpart to a well-known historical-philosophical argument of his, an argument located in the context of his historiography of messianism: that when deployed in a historical realm messianism has a deleterious effect (Scholem 1963b, 73). Here Scholem identifies a deficit – the flipside, as it were, of the excess of secularized Hebrew, a Hebrew for our time,

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<sup>27</sup> The original text is a three-page typescript, Scholem archive, Arc. 40 1599/277-II/56, printed in Mosès 1992, 215–217.

<sup>28</sup> And not as an ugly dwarf who has to hide himself – like theology in historical materialism’s secularized concept of salvation, in Benjamin’s historical-theoretical theses.

which he will point to a year later. He defines the deficit as follows: “You’ll hear everything in this land, but we haven’t heard the tone of lamentation” (two-page typescript, Scholem archive, Arc. 40 1599/277-II/54). He explains this absence in terms of a “fearful certainty” on the part of his contemporaries of the “sacrificial character of their situation,” a certainty that has choked off lamentation. In other words, the identity-concept of the sacrificial victim, who places himself at the service of something (here Zionism) and is thus subsumed to a compulsory signification in the framework of a particular political-moral discourse, renders impossible the language of lamentation – and with it, in the end, poetry, which emerges from lamentation’s linguistic rhythm. Scholem’s critique of the poetry of Chaim Nachman Bialik reflects the same context. In Bialik’s poetry, Scholem sees the quality of the lyrical eradicated by an indeterminate level of the half-allegorical; but especially in respect to Bialik’s pogrom poems, he also criticizes a mixing of lamentation and accusation: “Is he accusing things or language? It’s impossible to decide” (letter to Ernst Simon, 12 May 1926, Scholem 1994, 233).<sup>29</sup> These reflections on language developed in the mid-1920s refer back to Scholem’s theory of lamentation, but at the same time they can be read as an indirect reflection of his own youthful poetry – and their mix of religious and political motifs.

The various commentaries about and manifestations of poetry, literary form, and ways of writing we find in the texts of Scholem discussed here allow a correction of at least one established picture of his work, a picture in which his efforts in the literary sphere would be characterized as byproducts or abjecta. Rather, that sphere appears to have offered Scholem the possibility of stepping out from the strict hermeneutics of scholarship, of reflecting on his own place in the archive of knowledge – and of articulating ambivalences and dissonances not readily taken up into forms of communication and reconciliation.

*Translated by Joel Golb*

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GS            Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 7 vols. Ed. R. Tiedemann et al. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1991.

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<sup>29</sup> The demarcation between lamentation and accusation [*Klage* and *Anklage*] and the rejection of a mix of linguistic spheres is central to one of the paradigms Benjamin develops as well, above all in his essay on Karl Kraus. See Weigel 1997, ch. 7.

- Klage* Gershom Scholem. "Über Klage und Klagelied." 1917–1918. *Tb2*: 128–133. For English translation, see *Lament*.
- Lament* Gershom Scholem. Translation of *Klage* first published here (see pp. 313–319).
- Sprache* Walter Benjamin. "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen." *GS2.1*. 140–157.
- Tb* Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.
- WSF* Gershom Scholem. *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981. Rprtd. New York: New York Review Books, 2003.

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Caroline Sauter

## The Ghost of the Poet: Lament in Walter Benjamin's Early Poetry, Theory, and Translation

In the beginning was the death of a poet.<sup>1</sup> In August 1914, Walter Benjamin's close friend, the nineteen-year-old lyric poet Friedrich "Fritz" Heinle, committed suicide just as World War I was breaking out.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after Heinle's death, Benjamin began writing poetry. His seventy-three sonnets (1915–1925) mourn the death of his friend. While Benjamin was working on the Heinle sonnets, however, he developed his early language theory in "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" (1916) and his theory of the lyric in "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" (1914–1915). He also translated Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens" from *Fleurs du mal* and further developed his language and translation theory in the famous prologue to these translations, "The Task of the Translator" (1921). Benjamin's early work thus consists of three forms of expression: he is at once a writer, a theorist, and a translator of lyric poetry.

Benjamin's early poetry, theory, and translations are all deeply intertwined with the death of his poet friend. Furthermore, because all of these efforts, as I will argue, represent direct or indirect responses to Heinle's suicide, they all deal with the notion of lament: Benjamin's sonnets, his translations of Baudelaire's poetry, and his theoretical and philosophical writings on language explore lament as a distinct and unique form of language. Specifically, they all seem to suggest a connection between the language of lament and poetic ex-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ilit Ferber for her insightful comments and fruitful remarks on a first draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin and Fritz Heinle met in 1912–1913 in Freiburg, where Benjamin was a student in philosophy at the university. During the winter semester of 1913–1914, the two friends moved to Berlin together and became the presidents of the Free Students' Union [*Freie Studentenschaft*], a youth and student movement, and its discussion group [*Sprechsaal*]. The members met in an apartment rented by Benjamin, the so-called Meeting House or *Heim* [home]. It was here that Fritz Heinle and his girlfriend, Rika Seligson, committed suicide on 8 August 1914 by opening the gas tap. The couple probably meant their deaths to be an act of protest and resistance against the world war that had recently begun, though a daily newspaper, the *Vossische Zeitung*, identified "love grief" [*Liebesgram*] as their joint motive. Benjamin himself never gives any details or clues as to the precise circumstances of his friend's death. He mentions Heinle explicitly only in his later work, in *Berlin Chronicle* (1932) and in his two essays on Stefan George, "Stefan George in Retrospect" (1933) and especially "On Stefan George" (1928). On Heinle and Benjamin, see Wizisla 1992.



pression: for instance, the Heinle sonnets are actual laments in poetic form; the Hölderlin essay, in developing a theory of the lyric that is premised upon the poet's death, thus raises the possibility of poetic expression as lament; and the Baudelaire translations hint at a structural similarity between the language of lament and the form of translation, especially translated poetry.

This endeavor of Benjamin's goes hand in hand with a contemporaneous project of Gershom Scholem's. While Benjamin was writing laments in sonnet form about Heinle's death, as well as theoretical texts about language and lament and poetic translations from the French, Scholem was devoting himself to a translation of the biblical book of Lamentations, to which he wrote a short but very dense epilogue, commenting on the nature of lament and its language and its inherent kinship with poetry.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will trace the intersections among Benjamin's early poetry, theory, and translation in relation to Scholem's reflections about lament, in order to reach a conclusion about the language of lament and its connectedness to poetic expression. I want to show what poetry, theory, and translation, as three different forms of expression in Benjamin's early work, have in common: all of them question the possibility of poetic expression by introducing lament as a means to interrupt the stability of language.

Benjamin considered the essay "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin: 'The Poet's Courage' and 'Timidity'" to be his first major work, even though it was never published during his lifetime. He wrote it in the war winter of 1914–1915. So it was conceived under the direct influence of Fritz Heinle's suicide, and it can indeed be read as a dedication to and a dialogue with his friend's life, poetic work, and death. In a later text on Stefan George from 1928, Benjamin calls his early Hölderlin essay a "dedication" [*Widmung*] to his dead friend.<sup>4</sup> The essay

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<sup>3</sup> All English citations from Scholem's 1917–1918 essay "Über Klage und Klagelied" ("On Lament and Lamentation") are taken from the translation (*Lament*) in this volume. Benjamin's and Scholem's writings on the topic of lament and poetry are demonstrably interconnected: Scholem saw "On Lament and Lamentation" as a continuation of Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." In a diary entry from 3 December 1917, he writes: "Gestern das Nachwort zu der Klageliedübersetzung geschrieben [...]. Es ist sehr schwer geworden. [...] Die Fortsetzung der Spracharbeit [Walter Benjamins] wäre damit nun eigentlich begonnen, von mir" (*Tb2*, 88: "Wrote the epilogue to my translation of Lamentations yesterday. It has become very difficult. Thus the continuation of [Benjamin's] language essay has been begun – by me"). On the interconnection between Benjamin's and Scholem's language theories, see Weigel 2000, 24–28.

<sup>4</sup> In the first manuscript draft of "On Stefan George," Benjamin writes: "My friend died. Not in the battlefield. [...] A few months followed, of which I do not know anything anymore. In those months, however, which I had entirely dedicated to my first major work, namely an

is structured around a moment of loss: at the core of its central argument is the death of the poet. Following his methodological and terminological introduction, which defines the object of his study – “the poetized” [*das Gedichtete*] (SW1, 18) – and his method of presentation – “aesthetic commentary” (SW1, 18)<sup>5</sup> – Benjamin emphatically begins an analysis of two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin, namely “The Poet’s Courage” (“Dichtermut,” 1800) and “Timidity” (“Blödigkeit,” 1803), by invoking the death of the poet. He writes: “In the first version of [“The Poet’s Courage”], Hölderlin’s subject is a destiny – the death of the poet. Hölderlin praises in song the sources of the courage to die this death” (SW1, 22).<sup>6</sup> This is, very concisely, Benjamin’s interpretation of Hölderlin’s “The Poet’s Courage.”

He then proceeds to demonstrate an evolutionary process from “The Poet’s Courage” to “Timidity.” His discussion of “Timidity,” the “final version” of “The Poet’s Courage,” aims to show “how from the structured center [the poet’s death] a structuring movement necessarily forces its way from verse to verse” (SW1, 24). And this is why Benjamin returns to his presupposition about the poet’s death toward the end of his analysis, where he states that “death [...] was transposed to the center of the poem” and “in this center lies the origin of song” (SW1, 34). The “duality of death and poet,” according to Benjamin, is transformed into “the unity of a dead poetic world” (SW1, 34) – and this unity is what Benjamin calls the poetized [*das Gedichtete*]. Thus, the death of the poet is the origin of the poetized, which itself is destined to die. The poetized therefore is nothing but the evolutionary process of its own self-annihilation. As soon as the poetized starts speaking in and through the poem, it must speak in the language of lament – it must lament about itself, lament about its own destiny, which is its own death, its self-destruction, its suicide.

Both Benjamin’s argument and his method thus rest on the premise of the death of the poet, which is a figure for essential self-difference and self-denial up to the point of suicide (as exemplified in his notion of the poetized). He calls this death “the center from which the world of poetic dying was meant to arise” (SW1, 22), and, later, the “mythological law” of a “structured world”

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essay on two Hölderlinian poems, which was dedicated to him, my friend, the poems he had left behind took the place of those few areas at which poetry was still able to affect me decisively” (GS2.3, 921; trans. mine). Significantly, the Hölderlin reference has been crossed out by Benjamin. It appears only in the manuscripts, but not in the article printed in *Literarische Rundschau*, 13 July 1928 (see GS2.2, 623).

5 For a thorough explication of the introduction to Benjamin’s Hölderlin essay, see Wellbery 1988, 39–46.

6 English translations of Benjamin’s writings are taken from SW, if included there; all other Benjamin translations, including poetry, are my own.

(SW1, 23). Without the death of the poet, which presupposes the poem itself, the poem cannot exist. The *telos* – if there is any such thing – of the poem's existence, however, is to “sing a cosmos whose own decline is signified by the death of the poet” (SW1, 22). The death of the poet thus shapes and structures the poem, because it is the “structured center” (SW1, 24) of the poem itself. This is what Benjamin wants to show with his analysis, by stating that “death [...] was transposed to the center of the poem” and “in this center lies the origin of song” (SW1 34). In other words: the origin of any poem is the poet's death.

In Benjamin's view, the poet chooses death because he is heroic: “He is a hero because he lives the center of all relations” (SW1 34).<sup>7</sup> But the center, which he lives, paradoxically, is death – his own death. Consequently, the only life of the poet is his death. In the figure of the poet, life and death merge and become indistinguishable. The poet quite literally is a *revenant*: he is alive and dead simultaneously, and consequently he differs from himself at every point of his existence.<sup>8</sup> The undead life-death he lives is a spectral life.<sup>9</sup>

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7 In modernity, suicide and survival are the two extreme poles of melancholy resulting in modern heroism, as traced by Benjamin (in opposition to the tragic hero of the baroque) in his 1939 study *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*: “Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will [...] Such a suicide is not resignation but heroic passion. It is *the* achievement of modernity [...] Someone like Baudelaire could very well have viewed suicide as the only heroic act still available to the *multitudes malades* of the cities [...]” (SW4, 45–46). The two Hölderlin poems Benjamin chooses to analyze and interpret in his 1914–1915 essay, “The Poet's Courage” and “Timidity,” could also be understood as ciphers for suicide and (involuntary) survival; Shoshana Felman reads them as “the difference between Heine's (suicidal) courage and the timidity of Benjamin's own (condemnation to) survival” (Felman 1999, 215). Applying this reading to Benjamin's evolutionary interpretation of Hölderlin's two related poems, the poet's courageous suicide in “The Poet's Courage” is overcome in the later version, “Timidity,” by the survivor's timidity. In the Hölderlin essay, Benjamin explains the existence of the survivor as a second stage of suicidal courage, and he describes the poet's (suicidal) death as a redemption from a “timid” existence as a survivor.

8 There is one poet-figure in Hölderlin's work who is essentially not like himself, and who, because of this essential self-difference, kills himself: Empedocles. In the third version of Hölderlin's unfinished *Death of Empedocles*, the poet Empedocles voices this essential self-difference: “Ich bin nicht, der ich bin” [“I am not who I am”] (Hölderlin 1969, 2:557). The recognition of his self-difference leads to his suicide: Empedocles kills himself by jumping into the volcano because he is *not* who he is. Empedocles's statement of course is a distorted echo of a fundamental theologoumenon in Judaism, which will also be of decisive importance for Benjamin's notion of identity and infinity in his early philosophical writings: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (Exodus 3.14: “I am who I am”). His essential self-difference makes Empedocles a figure of God-unlikeness.

9 In Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, the “possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility” arises once one (or rather, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a “scholar”) is able to go beyond “the opposi-

There is one specific poet whose undead specter and whose death haunt Benjamin's sonnets and his Hölderlin essay: Fritz Heinle. The death of the poet in his reading of Hölderlin (especially Hölderlin's *Death of Empedocles*) and the death of the lyric poet Fritz Heinle in his own poetry seem to merge here. The analysis of poetry by Friedrich Hölderlin – *F. H.* – whose verses from *Patmos* serve as the motto for Benjamin's Heinle sonnets (see *GS7.1*, 25), conjures up another *F. H.* – Fritz Heinle. Heinle's name is present between the lines of Benjamin's Hölderlin interpretation, like a virtual interlinear – in the name of another poet who wrote poetry about the poet's death, another *F. H.*, Friedrich Hölderlin.<sup>10</sup>

From 1914 onwards, Hölderlin plays a decisive role in all of Benjamin's writings that explicitly deal with poetry and with poetic language, for instance, in Benjamin's dissertation on the concept of criticism in German Romanticism, his major essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, and his *Trauerspiel* book. The preface to the Baudelaire translations, namely the essay "The Task of the Translator," also identifies Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles and Pindar as being central to Benjamin's argument: Benjamin calls Hölderlin's translations the "prototypes [*Urbilder*] of their form" (*SW1*, 262). At the beginning of his essay, however, Benjamin remarks: "Translation is a form" (*SW1*, 254). The form whose prototype is manifested in Hölderlin's translations could therefore be translation itself. In Hölderlin's translations, two languages merge. They fuse until they become one new language. In Benjamin's words: "In them the harmony of languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind" (*SW1*, 262). This wind in Hölderlin's Pindar translations, or rather the aeolian harp touched by the wind [*wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde*], is an echo of one of Benjamin's Heinle sonnets. The seventeenth sonnet begins:

Die Harfe hängt im Wind sie kann nicht wehren  
Daß deines Todes Hauch die Saiten rührt

[The harp hangs in the wind, it cannot hinder  
The breath of your death to touch its strings<sup>11</sup>]

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tion between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life" (Derrida 1994, 13).

**10** Scholem also mentions this close affinity between Heinle and Hölderlin, who tend to merge in Benjamin's recollection: "Benjamin perceived his deceased friend Heinle [...] as a figure akin to Hölderlin" (*WSF*, 17).

**11** All sonnets by Walter Benjamin are included in *GS7.1*, 27–67, and in Benjamin 1986; the English translations here are my own. The Paris manuscript of the sonnet sequence consists of three parts: one cycle of fifty sonnets (I) deals with the topic of the double suicide of Fritz

The Hölderlin reference at the end of Benjamin's translation essay thus becomes readable as an implicit quotation: a quotation from his own poetry about the death of his poet friend. If we read "The Task of the Translator" and Benjamin's Heinle sonnet together – and they were written contemporaneously – we see that they are actually translations or echoes of each other. The sonnet's lament over Heinle's, the poet's, death – "Die Harfe hängt im Wind" – resounds in the "aeolian harp touched by the wind of language" in the translation essay. An actual lament in poetic form – Benjamin's sonnet about his friend's suicide – is being translated into translation theory at the exact point at which Hölderlin (F. H.) comes on stage – Hölderlin, who is Heinle's alter ego, and whose own work revolves around the suicide of a poet (Empedocles). Benjamin's lament about the poet's death thus resonates with his theory of the lyric and his translation theory. Lament seems to be a movement of and in language that is at the center of Benjamin's poetry and his theory alike.

Hölderlin's translations represent, according to Benjamin, the prototype of translation as such. This is why they must be "subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator in silence" (SW1 262). This statement about translation – in fact, about *all* translations – opens up an interesting connection with Gershom Scholem's notion of lament.

The form of translation is immediately and intimately linked to the form of lament in both Scholem's and Benjamin's language theories: Scholem's essay on lament is an epilogue to his translations of Lamentations from the Hebrew, and Benjamin's philosophical essay on translation is a prologue to his Baudelaire translations from the French. Moreover, both translation and lament, in Benjamin's and Scholem's respective views, seem to have an inherent relation with silence and muteness. In "On Lament and Lamentation," Scholem writes: "There is no answer to lament, which is to say, there is only one: falling mute [*das Verstummen*]" (*Lament*, 316). This is why Scholem calls lament "the deep opposition of revelation" (*Lament*, 316). And as we know from Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such," "the highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) [...] the only one that does not know the inexpressible" (SW1, 67). So if revelation, according to Benjamin, is essentially ex-

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Heinle and Rika Seligson; a sequence of nine sonnets (II) further explores the deaths of the couple, combined with poetological reflections on the sonnet form (this section is characterized as an "*ars poetica*" by Tiedemann in Benjamin 1986); and a third convolute (III) comprises fourteen more sonnets on his friends' deaths. The three-part structure is Benjamin's own arrangement.

pressible, and if revelation, according to Scholem, is the opposite of lament, then lament itself must be the inexpressible. In other words: “the highest mental region of religion” does not know lament.

Poetry, however, does know lament. Benjamin’s Heinle sonnets, for instance, lament the death of a poet and, in consequence, they lament the loss of poetic language: his voice is gone with the deceased poet, and the sonnets mourn this loss – but they do so in the realm of poetic expression. In his *Berlin Chronicle* (1932), Benjamin affirms: “Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not ‘in real life,’ but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way” (SW2, 604). The Heinle sonnets are an attempt to capture this short encounter “in his work” – that is, in poetry – in its own medium: poetic language.

There is a short but very dense passage in Benjamin’s major essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (1919–1922; SW1 297–360) where he develops his theory of poetic language. This essay was written during the period when he was working on his sonnet cycle on Heinle’s death and his foreword to the Baudelaire translations, “The Task of the Translator.” In the Goethe essay Benjamin characterizes poetic language as being essentially open – open to what Benjamin calls “the expressionless” [*das Ausdruckslose*], defined as “a category of language and art” (SW1, 340). He explicitly links the expressionless to his reading of Hölderlin’s *Annotations to Oedipus*, and to the Hölderlinian concept of caesura – in Hölderlin’s words, the caesura is “the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture” (quoted in SW1, 340 ff.). Benjamin himself describes the caesura as a realm in which “every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign [sic] to an expressionless power inside all artistic media” (SW1, 341). Being art, poetry thus opens itself up to reveal glimpses of something “other” that is beyond the poet but is not part of poetic expression, because it is strictly expression-less. This opening toward the end of expression in a form of expression itself (poetry) is an interruption. Benjamin writes: “Something beyond the poet interrupts the language of poetry” (SW1, 341). Poetry as artistic expression thus has to be open to its own interruption, which is its self-annihilation: the expression-less.

Here again, we can see an interconnection between Benjamin’s notion of the expressionless in his theory of poetry and Scholem’s theory of lament. The structure of poetic language in Benjamin’s theory of poetry is very similar to what Scholem takes to be the structure of lament.<sup>12</sup> Both have to do with si-

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<sup>12</sup> However, there is also a crucial difference between poetry and lament: poetic language has a certain productivity and development, whereas lament, following Scholem, operates completely contrary to the notion of development: “But lament, as long as it is lament, remains

lence, which, according to Benjamin's "Task of the Translator," is the ultimate danger inherent in all translation. Scholem explicitly linked the expressionless to lament in his 1917–1918 essay on lament. He writes: "The expression of innermost expressionlessness, the language of silence is lament" (*Lament*, 316). And, earlier in the essay: "Thus mourning partakes in language, but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language" (*Lament*, 316). In other words: the language of mourning – which finds its peculiar and precarious expression in lament – is a language that aims at its own self-annihilation, and thus at silence, without, however, ever achieving it, because it is caught up in "expressing" mourning. This dilemma is staged in Benjamin's Heinle sonnets: they challenge the possibility of poetic expression by lamenting its loss in poetry. Lament thus seems to be the starting point for the possibility of poetry about poetry's own impossibility.<sup>13</sup> Sonnet 12, for example, stages the quest for a poetic language,

Das nichts verriete und das nichts verschwiege  
Wortloses Lied das Worte nicht ermessen. (ll. 3–4)

[Which neither reveals nor conceals anything  
Wordless songs, which words will never measure.]

Those wordless songs,<sup>14</sup> which seem to be the prototype or ideal of all poetry, must be sung in the language of lament. The kinship between poetic language and lament can once again be inferred from a comparison between Benjamin and Scholem. In his lament essay, Scholem describes the language of lament in words that seem to resound almost verbatim with Benjamin's reflections about poetic language in the twelfth Heinle sonnet.<sup>15</sup> Lament, he writes, "re-

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always selfsame" (*Lament*, 315). I am grateful to Ilit Ferber for having pointed this out to me. Because I am more interested in structural similarities, I will not take into account the differences between lament and poetry for the purposes of this essay, however worthwhile it would be to pursue this further.

**13** For the notion of lament as the origin of poetry in Scholem, see Weigel 2000, 28–32.

**14** The connection between music ("wordless song") and lament is best developed in Benjamin's short text "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" (1916). In this essay, Benjamin calls music "the language of pure feeling" (*SW1*, 61). Music thus seems to surpass or transcend meaning even more powerfully than does lament. Benjamin repeatedly calls his Heinle sonnets "songs" rather than poems. He seems to suggest that the poems want to skip over lament in order to reach "the language of pure feeling" directly.

**15** Scholem remembers that Benjamin had often read to him from his Heinle sonnets in 1918–1919, during the time that they both lived in Switzerland. He also mentions that the sonnet cycle was not complete at this point (*WSF*, 64, 76). Scholem wrote "On Lament and Lamentation" in December 1917, with his fair-copy manuscript dated "January 1918." Given the chronol-

veals nothing, [...] and conceals [*verschweigt*] nothing, because its entire existence is based on a revolution of silence” (*Lament*, 313). So the possibility of this language – the language of lament – is the starting point for or the origin of a revolution, literally of a turn-around. But what is the language of lament? And what does it turn around or upside down?

To answer this question, we again have to turn around – or rather, turn back to Walter Benjamin’s language theory. According to Benjamin, “lament is the most undifferentiated, impotent [*ohnmächtig*] expression of language” (*SW1*, 73). In other words: lament contains neither a message, nor expression, nor meaning. It goes beyond any of those instances. This is why Scholem, whose text explicitly answers to Benjamin’s here, calls lament the “language of annihilation” (*Lament*, 314). What lament annihilates is language itself – as long as language is attributed a function, a message, or a meaning. His reflections on the structure of lament’s language lead Scholem to seemingly paradoxical considerations about poetic language. He posits: “Every lament can be expressed as poetry” (*Lament*, 317). And he explains this proposition with a German pun: “Die unendliche Gewalt, mit der jedes Wort sich selbst verneint und in die Unendlichkeit des Schweigens zurücksinkt, in der seine *Leere* zur *Lehre* wird [...] erweisen sie [die Klage] als Dichtung” (*Tb2*, 132; my emphasis), “the infinite force with which each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence, in which the word’s emptiness [*Leere*] becomes teaching [*Lehre*] [...] proves lament to be poetry” (*Lament*, 318).

Scholem is playing here with the homophony of *Leere*, emptiness, and *Lehre*, doctrine or teaching. What he is saying is: if poetic language is emptied [*leeren*] of referential function or meaning, and if language is therefore silent in poetic lament, it becomes *Lehre* [teaching, doctrine]. This is clarified if we point to one of the decisive premises of his argument: “The teaching which is neither expressed, nor alluded to in lament, but which is kept silent, is silence itself” (*Lament*, 316). The *Lehre* [teaching] is silence, and silence takes place wherever language empties itself [*leert sich*] and reveals itself to be devoid of meaning. Even lament cannot allude to this teaching of silence.

Scholem’s notion of a rather paradoxical oscillation in lament between *Leere* and *Lehre*, emptiness and doctrine, doctrine and silence is again reflected in one of Benjamin’s Heinle poems. The seventh sonnet calls the silent words of the dead poet a language of doctrine or teaching [*Sprache der Lehre*]. Lines 5–7 read:

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ogy, it is quite possible that Benjamin’s twelfth Heinle sonnet is quoting Scholem’s essay on lament.



Indes der Lehre Wort dein Finger ritzt  
 In meines Denkens Tafel die in Treuen  
 Die Zeichen wahrte –

[While your finger engraves the words of doctrine  
 On the tablet of my thoughts, which faithfully  
 Preserved the signs –]<sup>16</sup>

The language of the dead poet is the language of *Lehre*, the language of doctrine, which can, however, easily be confused with the language of *Leere*, of emptiness, because their difference is unspeakable, and because its doctrine [*Lehre*] is silence itself. The lost language of the dead poet's teaching [*der Lehre Wort*] is "engraved" (not spoken) in the "thoughts" (not words) of the surviving poet (Benjamin): *Lehre* apparently cannot be expressed in any direct form, but rather needs the medium of scripture, in which it can be kept and preserved [*wahren*] – albeit only in signs [*Zeichen*]. The perseverance of the language of *Lehre* is possible only in the mediated form of literature and poetry (like the sonnet Benjamin is writing), in which this language becomes a series of (mediated) signs.<sup>17</sup> However, the true, unmediated language of *Lehre* is not speakable, because it belongs to a realm that is not attainable via spoken language: truth.

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**16** This image in Benjamin's Heinle sonnet of course also evokes the giving of the tablets of the Law at Mount Sinai. In Jewish tradition, the original tablets have been engraved by YHWH himself: "And he gave unto Moses [...] two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God" (Exodus 31.18); "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables" (Exodus 32.16). After the Golden Calf incident, however, the furious prophet breaks the original tablets: "Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount" (Exodus 32.19). The divine script therefore is only available in translation and transmission: "And the LORD said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel. [...] And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (Exodus 34.27 ff.). In Benjamin's sonnet, the doctrine [*Lehre*] of the (non-Jewish) poet becomes a new Law, which goes back to the lost "original" and writes over the divine script.

**17** The term *Lehre*, in relation to literature and poetry, will famously appear again in Benjamin's 1934 essay "Franz Kafka." His verdict on Kafka is: "He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teaching [*Lehre*] ..." (SW2, 808). Benjamin's seventh Heinle sonnet, written about twenty years earlier, on the other hand, seems to be an attempt to convert teaching [*Lehre*] into poetry (a sonnet). Interestingly, the imagery of the graven tablets of the Law, evoked in the Heinle sonnet, also returns in Benjamin's Kafka essay at the exact point where the opposition between *Lehre* and poetry becomes important. The sentence following the line quoted above is: "No other writer has obeyed the commandment 'Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image' so faithfully" (SW2, 808).

*Lehre* as doctrine or teaching again resounds in “The Task of the Translator. Here Benjamin famously writes: “Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly, without any mediating sense, in true language, in Truth, or in doctrine [*Lehre*], this text is unconditionally translatable” (SW1, 262). In other words, the language of *Lehre* (whose only doctrine is *Leere*) is the necessary condition for unconditional translatability. The dead poet’s voice, uncannily oscillating between the language of emptiness [*Leere*] and the language of doctrine [*Lehre*], must be translatable: if the Heinle sonnets convert the language of *Lehre* [*der Lehre Wort*] into poetic language, and if, according to “Task of the Translator,” the literal quality of a text “takes part directly [...] in doctrine [*Lehre*],” then the Heinle sonnets must be “unconditionally translatable.” In fact, they are being translated in Benjamin’s Baudelaire translations.

Under the title “Die Kränkung der Luna,” Benjamin translated into German Baudelaire’s sonnet “La Lune offensée” (“The Moon Offended”). It is a peculiar text in many respects. For one thing, the placement of the translated sonnet departs from the arrangement of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, at least as it was published while the poet was alive.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin usually follows the arrangement of the 1861 edition, the last edition to have been published during Baudelaire’s lifetime. In the 1861 edition, the third poem in the “Tableaux parisiens” cycle is not “La lune offensée,” but “À une mendiante rousse” (“To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl”). In his German translation of Baudelaire’s “Tableaux parisiens,” Benjamin substitutes “Die Kränkung der Luna” for the beggar girl poem without indicating the change or commenting on it. In other words: the very presence of “La lune offensée” in Benjamin’s German “Tableaux parisiens” is a trace, the material presence of an absence.<sup>19</sup> It is the uncanny presence of a spectral other in the text.

This is not a coincidence. The poem, which in Benjamin’s translation of “Tableaux parisiens” is literally taking the place of another, destroys the order of the source-text. Or rather: it interrupts its order and thereby creates a caesura – a gap, an opening, a fissure, a lacuna in the order of the now-translated original. The original itself changes in the act of translation. The translator translates *another* original. The expressionless language of lament becomes

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18 “La lune offensée” was published once in Baudelaire’s lifetime, in *L’Artiste*, 1 March 1862. It was first collected in book form in the posthumous 1868 edition of *Fleurs du mal*, published under the direction of Théodore de Banville and Charles Asselineau, in which it was placed fourth in the “Tableaux parisiens” series, after “Lola de Valence” (also not included in the 1861 edition) and before “À une mendiante rousse.”

19 For the notion of trace as the material presence of an absence and its undefinable ontological status in-between being perceptible and being imperceptible, see Derrida 1972, 76–77.

readable in the differences, the openings, the gaps and fissures between the original and the translation: the virtual interlinear, which is inscribed in those openings and lacunae, is Benjamin's own poetry lamenting the death of the poet, and thus, the language of lament. The first lines of the original and of the translation read, respectively:

O Lune qu'adoraient discrètement nos pères  
[O Moon whom our fathers worshipped discreetly]<sup>20</sup>  
  
O Luna deren Dienst nun Tote wahren  
[O Luna whose worship is (now) observed by the dead]

Benjamin translates the French *nos pères* – our fathers, our forefathers, our ancestors – emphatically as *Tote* – that is, as corpses, as dead bodies. The dead return to life *in* poetry and *as* poetry. They appear as undead revenants, and they haunt Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's poetry. In the "Trauerspiel and Tragedy" essay – from the same period as both "On Language as Such" and the Baudelaire translations – Benjamin writes: "The dead become ghosts" (SW1, 57). A ghost, like a trace, is the manifest presence of an absence.<sup>21</sup> And this is why Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's "La lune offensée" here has a changed verb tense: a past-tense form, the French *imparfait* ("adoraient"), becomes a present tense, the German *Präsens* ("wahren"). The *nun Tote*, the "now deceased," haunt the poem with their undead, "un-present" (Derrida 1994, 5) presence/present in the present tense. They are not past, and they have not passed away.

A ghost is neither absent nor exactly present; he is neither past nor present, neither dead nor alive. In other words: he is liminal in nature; he is nothing but pure border. The ghost himself is the border between two realms: absence and presence, past and present, life and death.<sup>22</sup> The figure of the

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<sup>20</sup> All English translations of Baudelaire's original French poems and their German translations by Benjamin are my own. Both are meant to provide a word-to-word translation of the French and German texts, respectively, and do not aim at poetic quality.

<sup>21</sup> For the connection between the ghost and the trace in relation to life, after-life, and living-on [*sur-vie*; *Über-Leben*], see Derrida's "exordium" to his *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994, xvi–xx).

<sup>22</sup> The ghost is of course a prominent figure in Benjamin's early *Trauerspiel* book (see Ferber 2013, 102–117), but it becomes eminent in Benjamin's later work as well. His accounts of nineteenth-century Paris in *Arcades* – and, perhaps even more so, his poetic Berlin of around 1900 in *Berlin Childhood* and in *One-Way Street* – explicitly refer to the Baudelairean and surrealist tradition of the "spectral city" (Cohen 1993, 114–116). Benjamin's Paris is haunted by phantoms, ghosts and specters. This is especially obvious in some fragments of the *Arcades* project. In the *L* convolute (*Dream House*, *Museum*, *Spa*), a ghost appears as the protagonist of one of Benjamin's dream accounts. Here the thought images of the arcade and the specter merge,

ghost – and especially the ghost of the dead poet – is a figuration, a metaphor of the same border that Scholem describes as characterizing the language of lament. According to Scholem, lament is a borderline expression of utmost sorrow, which, however, can neither attain revelation nor fall completely silent. Scholem's lament essay links his concept of sorrow to a metaphor of light. He speaks of the "the darkness of all mourning, which absorbs its own light" (*Lament*, 318). This darkness is reflected in Benjamin's translation of "La lune offensée". Baudelaire's third line reads:

Les astres vont te suivre en pimpant attirail  
[The stars will follow you in brilliant attire]

And Benjamin translates:

Die Sterne mit dir ziehn in Strahlenschleiern  
[The stars move with you in radiant veils]

If revelation is the lifting of the veil [*velum*], the unveiling [*apo-kalypsis*]<sup>23</sup> of something that had been hidden, then Benjamin's translation does stage here the "genuine opposition of revelation" (*Lament*, 314). The stars are explicitly

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thus pointing to the uncanny presence of ghostly appearances even in the city architecture: "The path we travel through arcades is fundamentally just such a ghost walk, on which doors give way [*Türen nachgeben*] and walls yield" (*Arcades*, 409 [L2,7]). In the arcades, ghosts are present everywhere. Walls are penetrable. Doors give way easily, and they "appear closed without being so" (*Arcades*, 409 [L2,7]). In those unlockable openings, gaps and fissures open up between dichotomous realms – past and present, for instance. In his last text, "On the Concept of History" (1940; also referred to as "Theses on the Philosophy of History"), Benjamin uses the thought-image of the open door from the *Arcades* again, and in a similar context: he says in his famous addendum B that "every second" was "for the Jews" the "small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter" (SW4, 397). It would be very interesting to trace the development of Benjamin's recurring idea and imagery of openings and fissures, lacunae, and interruptions in relation to his notion of spectrality from his earliest to his late work, but it is beyond the scope of the present essay.

**23** The German term *Offenbarung* [revelation] signifies the exact opposite to the Greek term ἀποκάλυψις ["uncovering," "withdrawal of a veil"; Latin *velum*]. Etymologically, the German term derives from the Old High German *bēran*: "give birth to; carry under the bosom" (Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 519). *Offen-barung* literally means "the birth of openness." So the German term *Offenbarung* implies *aletheia* [non-concealment], whereas ἀπο-κάλυψις [*re-velatio*] signifies the necessary re-veiling of an unveiled object. For the implications thereof, and for further etymological clarifications, see Forte 2003, 18–19. In this sense, ἀποκάλυψις [*revelatio*] can never be *Offenbarung*: *re-velare* explicitly encompasses the presence of a veil [*velum*]. In other words: *revelatio* does not point to the unveiled, but to the moment of re-veiling, and it therefore emphasizes the presence and materiality of the veil, the *tissu*, the texture, the text.

called “veiled” [*Strahlenschleiern*] in Benjamin’s translation – in contrast to Baudelaire’s French original, which does not speak of the stars’ veil. The stars in Benjamin’s translation are, in other words, explicitly *not* revealed. However, there is a moment of revelation, or literally of unveiling [*apo-kalypsis*], later in the translation. This moment of revelation is attributed to the sleeping lovers of Benjamin’s translation. Baudelaire – addressing the moon – writes in lines 5–6:

Vois-tu les amoureux, sur leurs grabats prospères,  
De leur bouche en dormant montrer le frais émail?

[Do you see the lovers, on their fertile beds,  
Showing the fresh enamel of their mouth in their sleep?]

Benjamin translates:

Kannst Du [... // ] Auf ihrer Streu die Liebenden gewahren  
Wenn schlummernd sie den reinen Mund entschleiern?

[Can you [... // ] behold the lovers on their litter,  
When, slumbering, they unveil their pure mouth?]

The moon here witnesses a moment of revelation, that is, the literal unveiling of a pure mouth [*reiner Mund*]. At this point, Benjamin’s Baudelaire translation hints at his theory of pure language developed in the “Tableaux parisiens” preface, “The Task of the Translator.” There he writes that it “is the tremendous and only capacity of translation” to “regain pure language” (SW1, 261). What the preface says in purely theoretical terms is transported – or rather translated – into the poetic language of the translation itself. Benjamin’s Baudelaire translation does regain pure language quite literally when explicitly talking about the apocalypse (unveiling) of a pure speech or “pure mouth” [*reiner Mund*].

However, the only possibility of pureness of language is here attributed to the sleeping lovers on their litter. This motif of course evokes two other lovers – namely the couple Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson, who committed suicide by opening the gas tap and, dying, looked as if they were sleeping peacefully. Benjamin repeatedly uses this motif of the sleeping-dying lovers in his Heinle sonnets. If he is attributing the possibility of pure language to *this* couple – the poet and his lover – in “Die Kränkung der Luna,” then he is implying that the revelation of pure language could be made possible only by a definite falling into silence, that is, by the physical death of the poet. If revelation is, according to Scholem, the deep “opposition of lament” (*Lament*, 316), and if lament “can be overcome or transformed through no other means than by lead-

ing it toward revelation" (*Lament*, 313), and if Benjamin's translation stages a revelation of "pure mouth," then this translation seems to try to overcome lament by hinting at the achievement of pure language through the poet's death.

This symbolic achievement of pure language is a poetic image. Pure language, however, is unspeakable and therefore not attainable in language as such. If there is something that Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," calls "a hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages" (SW1, 257), then there is only one possibility for reconciliation: silence [*Schweigen*]. The last sentence of Scholem's "On Lament and Lamentation" reads: "This constitutes the grounds of our hope for the restitution of language, of reconciliation: for, indeed, it was language that suffered the fall into sin, not silence [*Schweigen*]" (*Lament*, 319). Earlier in the essay he had remarked: "Thus, one lament cannot be translated into another in a meaningful way, since this translation transforms nothing" (*Lament*, 314). This is why the goal of translation for Benjamin and lament for Scholem is, ultimately, silence.

Walter Benjamin's laments – the Heinle sonnets – and his lament theory – in "On Language as Such" – are both deeply intertwined with silence, muteness, and falling silent. Language in silence is devoid of meaning, and it is thus freed from the burden to communicate. According to "The Task of the Translator," pure language (or as his Baudelaire translation would have it, "the pure mouth") is a language "which no longer means or expresses anything" (SW1, 261): it is the expressionless, which we find in "Goethe's Elective Affinities" and which Benjamin calls "the pure word" (SW1, 340). *Schweigen*, *Verstummen*, and *Stille* apparently are the fulfillment or the purest form of language – in lament. Silence is the only doctrine [*Lehre*] of lament.

However, there is a paradoxical relationship between lament and silence: the absolute necessity of speechlessness and silence in lament has to be *voiced* in lament. Lament therefore does not and cannot transgress the border to silence. Rather, it is the border. In other words, lament will never fall silent. If this is the case, lament is always only projecting its own fulfillment – namely silence – into the future. It permanently lags behind itself, like a ghost – the dead poet's ghost – who is neither alive nor dead.

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Adam Lipszyc

## Words and Corpses: Celan's "Tenebrae" between Gadamer and Scholem

*Ein Wort – du weißt: eine Leiche.*

– Paul Celan

Paul Celan's celebrated poem "Tenebrae," written in 1957 and published the following year in *Sprachgitter*, makes extensive use of Christian or, more precisely, Christological imagery.<sup>1</sup> Not only does the title refer to a service held during the Paschal Triduum, but the poem itself speaks of God's body and of the Lord shedding or spilling blood. Only a bit less explicit is the allusion in line 12 of the poem, where "we" go to bend over "pit and crater" [*Mulde und Maar*]. The missing word that mediates between these two is *Kar* or *Kaar*, the glacial cirque, which echoes the word *Maar* and also appears in one of Celan's notes for this poem, where it is explained as referring to "a pit created by the action of a glacier" [*eine durch Gletscherwirkung entstandene ... Mulde*] (Celan 2005, 650). This *Kar* also clearly alludes to the word *Karfreitag*, Good Friday, when the Tenebrae service is often held.

No wonder, then, that the poem provokes Christological interpretations. One such reading was offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his short 1975 essay "Sinn und Sinnverhüllung bei Paul Celan" ("Sense and the Veiling of Sense in Paul Celan," Gadamer 1993 [1975]). The gist of Gadamer's interpretation is that the poem establishes a community of those who are subject to the power of death. Yes, death is a solitary experience; my death is mine and mine only. But this solitariness can be also seen, dialectically, as the very foundation of community and solidarity. Gadamer says: "If I am one with you in the mine-ness of dying, then the oneness means closeness and covenant even in the radical abandonment." (Gadamer 1993 [1975], 456) Understood in such a way, death is accepted here as the final destination of human beings linked by this peculiar solidarity of the solitary.

This approach enables Gadamer to account for the use Celan makes of Christological imagery. First, Gadamer assumes that the voice speaking in the poem addresses Jesus Christ, seen as "the Lord," but also – and this is crucial – clearly distinguished from God the Father. The famous or notorious lines, "pray, Lord, / pray to us," are interpreted as saying: "You, Jesus, do not pray

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<sup>1</sup> For the text of Celan's poem and the translation I am using here, see the end of this essay.



to God the Father who knows nothing about dying; pray to us, as we know everything about what it means to be mortal.” Thus, separated from the transcendent God the Father, Jesus Christ is seen here as following the path of incarnation, of becoming human, to the very end – that is, to the point of total abandonment and solitary death. If “we” drink blood, which Gadamer reads as the Lord’s blood (though the poem does not identify it as such), this means that we follow him on this path and so accept solitary death as our common predicament. This would be the peculiar non-Christian communion, in Gadamer’s own words, that is enacted in the poem.

Thus, Gadamer can finally face and answer the question that he states at the beginning of his reading, namely the question as to whether this is a pious or a blasphemous poem (by which he evidently, and rather comically, means only: pious or blasphemous in Christian terms!). He admits that it is hard to see any dogmatic consolation or hope of redemption and resurrection in the poem. Also in this sense is the horizon of transcendence totally eclipsed in Celan’s universe. However, Gadamer insists that “the blasphemous aspect visible in the entirety of the poem turns almost into its opposite” (Gadamer 1993 [1975], 458). This is because the Christian doctrine of incarnation is radically affirmed here, according to Gadamer, and moreover, Christ remains “the Lord” for the voice speaking in the poem. And this is the ultimate basis of the communion, the community of the isolated. Gadamer writes: “Perceiving ourselves as destined to die, we experience our ultimate union with dying Jesus who feels himself abandoned by God” (Gadamer 1993 [1975], 457).

Now, we can see that although Gadamer denies any aspect of hope or promise in the poem, it may be argued that his reading is so optimistic that he can easily give up the moment of promise, as well as any moment of transcendence and, indeed, any positive reference to God the Father. For if we assume with Gadamer that when entering Celan’s poem we enter a universe where incarnation is completed to the point of the total abandonment and solitude of Christ’s death, and yet this incarnation does not subvert or reduce *ad absurdum* the divinity of Christ, then, indeed, it’s not that bad after all! It is precisely this understanding of incarnation that makes possible the swift dialectical move from the total solitude of individual death to the solidarity and community of all mortals who accept their fate and so enter the communion in Jesus Christ, the Lord incarnate. Moreover, this universe can be easily recognized as Gadamer’s own, as described in his *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1992 [1960]). In its ultimate structure it is the universe of Christian Neoplatonism, where the process of emanation/incarnation guarantees the full and hence highly reassuring presence of the divine Logos in the world. It is the Logos – i.e., Christ conceived as the Word – that is the ultimate ground for all meaning and com-

munion between suffering individuals. In this world our singular suffering is redeemed not by the promise of resurrection, but by its being accepted and sublated in the immanent element of the Word.

It is worth noting that if we identify this theological subtext of Gadamer's interpretation, we can also see the deep unity between the meaning he finds in Celan's poem and his reading strategy. The essay on "Tenebrae" opens and ends with certain general methodological remarks, which deal mostly with the problem stated in the title of the essay, i.e., the problem of meaning and its *Verhüllung*, its veiling or hiding in Celan's poetry in particular and in contemporary lyrical poetry in general. When reading Celan, Gadamer writes close to the beginning of the essay,

one feels the power of attraction of a precise meaning, but at the same time one is aware of the fact that this meaning is being kept withdrawn if not intentionally veiled [...] Contemporary lyrical [...] poetry speaks in blocks, where the words inducing images stand side by side, but this does not mean they cannot be merged into a unity of meaningful intention. But the realization of this postulate is a task left to the reader. It is not by any means so that the poet arbitrarily darkens and veils the unity of meaning. Thanks to this veiling, the poet wants to reveal something [...] It is wrong to assume that a poem cannot be understood because the relations of meaning are not unequivocal. And it is wrong to think that there is no unity of the speech intention here. In fact, only this unity constitutes the poem. (Gadamer 1993 [1975], 452)

Having presented his reconstruction of this unity in "Tenebrae," Gadamer comes back to the problem in the conclusion of his essay:

At the end of this attempt at interpretation of meaning we may be able to more closely define the veiling of sense characteristic for such poetry. The exegesis of the poem has shown that what we are dealing with here is not an intentional veiling and hiding of meaning which could be stated clearly and in an unequivocal way. The poet has here entered a sphere, which has its own defining constellations. The final moment of "the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus," his last breath on the cross, merges here with the fear of death and the certainty of dying that in each of us are a present and yet a hidden power at the same time – and it is this mysterious unity that the poem confirms with its own enslaving might. (Gadamer 1993 [1975], 458–459)

We have seen that, in Gadamer's universe, the community of mortals is guaranteed by their communion in Christ conceived as Logos, the Word incarnate. But it is the same divine omnipresence of the Word that guarantees the very possibility of hermeneutic understanding that is able to grasp the poem's seemingly broken linguistic construction in the unity of its intention and identify the veiled, hidden harmony that (in the words of Heraclitus, of which Gadamer was very fond) is deeper than the overt one. Perhaps it can even be said that by the very process of understanding – by which I mean both the under-

standing of a literary work and the historical understanding of the past – the reader joins and participates in the same veiled community of the Word which, according to Gadamer, Celan's poem establishes between all those who accept death as their destiny.

Even if we postpone a closer reading of Celan's poem, it is not hard to see that Gadamer's interpretation is at least troubling. This feeling may spring from the superimposition in "Tenebrae" of Christian or Christological imagery with images of the historical catastrophe of the Shoah. The bodies clawing into each other in the second stanza are clearly the corpses of the Shoah's victims, and the eyes and mouths that remain open in the eighth stanza also belong to the dead, not to mention this passage's direct allusion to Jean Cayrol's text for Alain Resnais' film *Night and Fog*, which Celan translated into German (Celan 2005, 650). Even if one argues that the poem should not be reduced to the historical concreteness of the Shoah, it is evident that it is trying to define the human condition in the post-Shoah world – and I do not think it would be very wise to go much further away from the historical. If we take this superposition of Christological and Shoah images into account, it is very hard not to see Celan's use of Christology as being fiercely sarcastic, and so it is difficult to believe with Gadamer that Celan accepts the idea of incarnation, even if not the idea of resurrection.

One more glance at the second stanza shows what is going on here: instead of clinging to the Lord's body, we cling to or rather claw into each other's bodies. One might even go a bit further. If Christ, the God incarnate, is also – as in Gadamer – Logos, the Word incarnate, *der Begriff* [concept] itself, which holds together the things of this world, then we might perhaps see one more dimension of Celan's sarcasm in his play on the word *greifbar*. We are *greifbar* [graspable], but actually already *gegriffen* [grasped], a condition that is intensified and materialized into our being *ineinander verkrallt* [clawed into each other]. It is as if Celan were saying: sure, there is Logos, *der Begriff*, in this world – and so we are very logically grasped, squeezed, and clawed into each other. Instead of the Word, which establishes the community of the suffering, there is the materialized Clawing, which brings together the corpses.

But if we conclude that Gadamer rather illegitimately smuggles the revealed and embodied Logos, the Word incarnate, into the universe of the poem, then we might be willing to describe this universe without the Christological cargo – as the site of a much more radical loss, which is not sufficiently captured by Gadamer's abandonment of the idea of resurrection. One way to come closer to the true nature of this loss is to stick to the Shoah subtext of the poem and radicalize Celan's sarcasm directed against Christological imagery into a clear-cut Jewish-Christian polemic. Then, rather reductively, we might

read Celan as saying: this is what happened or even is happening to us, Jews, in Christian Europe. And if we walk a few steps down this road, we will inevitably encounter the question of lament. For it is not a secret that the reading of passages from the book of Lamentations forms a key element in the Tenebrae service, and that Celan's poem is composed of twenty-two lines, imitating the structure of the biblical *kinot*. Thus, we might conclude that what Celan is offering in "Tenebrae" is a Jewish dirge, a lamentation for the post-Shoah world. Following this hint, we might leave the Christological framework altogether and read Celan's poem – or, more precisely, define the loss and the status of the word in the universe of this poem – in the framework solely defined by Jewish theology. And then we might be drawn to the theory of lament offered by Gershom Scholem.

I am not going to reconstruct all the elements of Scholem's theory of lament as expounded in his 1917–1918 essay "Über Klage und Klagelied" and the various diary entries recorded in the following months (*Tb2*, 128–133, *Lament*, 313–319). This theology is the main focus of other articles in the present volume. Here I want to collect only the elements that might form a useful frame of reference for reading Celan's poem.

According to Scholem, every linguistic form depends on revelation. Revelation itself has no meaning or content, for it is just the fullness of linguistic positivity as such. Lament occupies the opposite pole of the linguistic spectrum. Just like revelation, it has no meaning or content, but for opposite reasons: it is a perfectly empty discourse, a language that walks and talks on the border of silence, a language on the verge of annihilation. Lament does not contain positively any element of revelation, but is called forth by it: revelation brings about the "revolution" of sadness or mourning [*die Trauer*] that turns it inside out and turns into lament. But its link to revelation is even more complex than that. Revelation is nothingness [*das Nichts*], the Cohenian origin [*Ursprung*] of language. However, it can also be said that silence [*das Schweigen*] is the origin of language – and according Scholem these two statements are identical (*Tb2*, 139, 158). I propose to read this complex idea in the following way. Revelation calls forth lament, which then preserves it in the form of silence by, paradoxically enough, remaining silent about it. Thus, thanks to revelation, the seemingly empty silence into which every lamenting word sinks can in fact be seen as the doctrine – emptiness [*die Leere*] becomes doctrine [*die Lehre*] – and through lament this doctrine is transmitted by the Jewish community from generation to generation. As an objectless language, lament is perfectly monotonous; it runs through alphabet in an acrostical slide, endlessly repeating the same gesture – the gesture of mourning the loss of its object (*Tb2*, 148). And if, above and beyond particular objects, the object that was

lost is the Temple as the site of the divine, or, ultimately, the divine itself, then we may say that lament is the linguistic paraphrase of the Fall. Thus, lament is both a language of loss and a language transmitting the doctrine in/of silence, the apparent gap between these two arguably divergent points being bridged by the presence of revelation in the Scholemian universe.

Lament is further defined by the concept of deferral – in a double sense. On the one hand, lament is not a natural scream, but it is a scream infinitely delayed (*Tb2*, 382), caught in – and as Walter Benjamin would say, betrayed by (*GS2*, 138) – the linguistic domain. On the other hand, lament wants to stay on the border of language, it does not want to go any further into the realm of speech, and so it constantly defers meaning. It eliminates meaning from language; it prevents language from meaning something and hence from pretending that nothing has happened and that the object has not been lost (*Tb2*, 365). In other words, it prevents the immanence of meaning from closing upon our heads, which also means that, at least in Judaism, it constantly tears open the immanent structure of myth from which lament springs in the pagan world. Lament [*Klage*] is a constant accusation [*Anklage*], not of any particular object, but of language itself, whenever it tries to close its semantic-mythical structures (*Job*, 321–323). And yet it is also – to speak with Benjamin rather than with Scholem – a mourning of, a lament over, language itself, for its inability to reach its object (*Sprache*, 155). Moreover, being the linguistic mechanism of constant deferral, lament is also the speech of justice, the only just speech that there is – because it constantly defers the closing of the mythical structures, it is able to do justice to our fallen condition (*Tb2*, 359, 362).

And this, finally, shows the paradoxical link between lament and the messianic order. Lament possesses a messianic power that, however, is very weak indeed: it does not redeem or save anything on the linguistic level. It is only able to tear the myth apart, to testify to our fallen condition, and to mourn the loss. It lets us pass from the mythical to the historical – from the seemingly closed to the explicitly broken – and so it keeps language and the world itself constantly open for the coming redemption (*Tb2*, 391). Lament does not point positively to it, but the unfallen element of silence, the nothingness of language that lament is always silent about and is able to transmit, preserves the promise of the messianic event. Thus, Scholem can finally say, that although night is the realm of the demonic and messianic time is eternal day, there is one domain in which darkness radiates: it is the realm of lament (*Tb2*, 306).

Now, following the suggestion that Gadamer's Christological reading of "Tenebrae" is insufficient, we could read the poem against the background of the Scholemian theory of lament. First, on the formal level, we may point out that the fact that the poem opens and ends with two lines composed of almost

the same words, in reversed order, suggests that "Tenebrae" is a never-ending cycle – a quality that Scholem identified as an essential feature of lament (*Tb*2, 365). Much more importantly, we might venture that, in line with the pattern reconstructed above, Celan's poem is a dirge, which both accuses and laments over language itself. The moment of accusation would be inscribed in the very play on the word *greifen* [grasp], though read somewhat differently than above: we are *gegriffen* [grasped] by language that is worthy of accusation whenever it pretends not to be fallen and so closes upon us in semantic formations isomorphic with the closed structures of mythical, violent law. But once the violent appearance of closure and meaning has been destroyed, the language that has lost its capability to work, the language that has lost its object, is certainly worthy of lamentation – and so are we who speak this language. This lamentation can be found perhaps in the eighth stanza of the poem, where the primal object, *Herr* [the Lord] is emptied out by the ironic juxtaposition with the world *leer* [empty], and so our mouths stay open and empty indeed. In this reading, Celan's poem – staged in the mournful glacio-volcanic landscape of *Mulde und Maar* [pit and crater] that strangely mirror the open mouths – would be a lament that documents and laments the hollowness of language. But, in such a reading, even this lament would transmit the emptiness of silence as a doctrine, the only form in which revelation can be present in our fallen language: present precisely through its own absence.

However, the moment we attempt this reading, we smack up against its limitations: there are too many elements of the poem that have to be left out if we want to interpret it this way. And to correct this reading, we have to come back to – and face – the issue of the Christological imagery of the poem. Gadamer is certainly naive when he claims that Celan is accepting Christological imagery and the ideas of incarnation and communion (with only somewhat blasphemous coloring). But it is also wrong to move Celan into the Judaic world pure and simple. I suggest that the way Celan uses, and indeed abuses, Christological imagery not only subverts Christian dogma much more deeply than Gadamer imagined, but it also offers a truly frightening picture of the world, which is characterized by an even more radical loss than the world of Scholem. The crucial paradox would be, then, that the Jewish lament for the post-Shoah world springs from a radical subversion of the Christological imagery rather than directly from the Judaic pattern. So let us see, finally, how this works.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Katarzyna Bojarska, Paweł Mościcki, Paweł Piszczatowski, and Maciej Adam Sosnowski of the Franz Kafka University of Muri for their suggestions that I've used in the reading that follows.

It is hard to deny that the eighth stanza of the poem speaks of something that looks like Christian communion: “we” drink blood shed by the Lord and the Lord’s image that is in the blood. But it is also not necessary to deny it. For contrary to what Gadamer claims, this communion does not connect us to the divine and so to each other. Rather, it disconnects us, for the Lord’s image is also our own image (the biblical *tzelem*), and this blood is our own blood, too. I would suggest that what we drink in this truly non-Christian communion, in this horrifying short-circuiting of the very idea of communion, is our own thirst, our own desire – which is precisely why the mouths remain empty – with Christ being only the principle of this lack, or maybe the principle of the infinite, abysmal deepening of this lack in the maddening mirror relationship! And if in the first two stanzas we seem to be near to God and to each other, then this nearness does not result in communion and community. Paradoxically, the image of nearness expresses much more dramatic a loss than any image of distance or withdrawal might produce. Is there any incarnation in this world? Perhaps. But then incarnation can only mean that each of us is a dead God for the other! And even if the identity between Christ and the Word is really assumed here, then this is also really bad news for language. Encouraged by the epigraph of this essay (taken from the poem “Nächtlich Geschürzt”; Celan 2005, 80) – *Ein Wort, du weißt: eine Leiche* [A word, you know: a corpse] – I am tempted to say that here incarnation means only that the Word becomes a corpse, not connecting but rather disconnecting us forever.

All this is meant not merely to refute the Gadamerian reading. For if I am right, then it is also bad news for the Scholemian reading of Celan’s poem that I sketched above. In the Scholemian universe of lament the pure linguistic principle of revelation is still there. Even if it seems that it is not positively accessible for us, it calls forth our lament, which then is able to transmit the doctrine of silence from generation to generation of our national community – precisely by remaining silent about it. But in the ironically Christological world of “Tenebrae,” the linguistic principle, instead of keeping a distance, revealed itself in this most radical way, which is called incarnation – or (excuse my Latin) incadaverization. Parallel to this is the fate of silence. Unlike in Scholem, in the Celanian universe silence is not untouched by the Fall; it is not a meaningful emptiness that can be seen as a doctrine. It is the abysmal emptiness of the mouth drinking its own thirst, the ever-deepening lack of the Word. This silence cannot be transmitted, and no community can form around it. Not only the Gadamerian community based on the Word incarnate that binds and connects mortals, but also the Scholemian community based on the collective lament that transmits meaningful silence of revelation is absent from the universe of “Tenebrae” – where we are, again, not connected, but rather disconnected via the word.

Logically enough, this collapse of the order of revelation and so of the order of silence finds its reflection in the temporal dimension of this world and its messianic potential. For Scholem the lament tore apart the closure of immanent myth and opened up the historical realm. We may guess that, given the hollow nature of lament, the historical realm that is opened is not a chain of meaningful events forming the salvation history [*Heilsgeschichte*], but rather a series of catastrophes characteristic of our fallen state. And yet – history it is. Not so much in "Tenebrae." The unexpected turn to the present tense in line 2 of the eighth stanza, which shows that our mouths remain empty even after we have drunk and which is followed by a return to the past tense – this turn suggests also that the temporal axis of Celan's world is radically twisted. Things have happened here, but at the same time they are still happening, while failing to happen for good. Our empty mouths get endlessly reflected in themselves, their emptiness growing; we are near, clawed into each other's corpses in the never-ending process of becoming nearer and nearer. No wonder then, that this world has no messianic horizon, either, that no messianic *Umschwung* or reversal awaits this sad universe. Gadamer has surely recognized that, but it did not cost him much, as he assumed the immanent presence of Christ or the Word. In the Scholemian universe, on the other hand, lament holds the torn world open toward the messianic horizon even if it is directly not accessible for *Klage* itself. This is why, as we have seen, darkness radiated in the lament. Celan's universe is the world of darkness, the universe of *tenebrae*, but it does not radiate. Or, rather, it shines: for there is the incredible seventh stanza composed only of the two words "*Es glänzte*" – which almost shines by itself and blocks the flow of the poem for one terrible moment. But this shining is not any kind of messianic radiance. It is rather the image that stands in the middle of Celan's lamentation, which marks the very spot of the never-ending loss.

This crucial image of shining – or the shining image – certainly demands our closer attention.<sup>3</sup> First, it is worth noting that the concept of image plays a key role in Celan's own theory of poetry as expounded in his famous "Meridian" speech of 1960, given when receiving the prestigious Georg Büchner award. True, the speech itself contains only one passage that refers to the idea of image, but it is quite a dense fragment indeed. Introducing the crucial distinction between images and tropes, Celan says here: "And what would be the images? They would be that which is perceived and to be perceived uniquely, again and again uniquely and only now. And the poem would thus be the place

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3 I am grateful to Ilit Ferber from Tel Aviv University and the Franz Kafka University of Muri for making me think more about the question of image in Celan's poem.



where all the tropes and metaphors want to be driven *ad absurdum*” (Celan 1999, 10). If this is not enough, then a few important notes for the “Meridian” speech explain the crucial significance for Celan of the concept of image. Let us take a look at three of them. First note: “The status of the image = not visual, but something spiritual” (Celan 1999, 101). Second note, which is a version of the passage from the final version of the speech quoted above: “The poem is the place where all the synonymity comes to an end; where all the tropes and everything that is inauthentic is driven *ad absurdum*; I think that even at its most image-like the poem has an antimetaphorical character; the image has a phenomenal quality, which is recognizable through intuition [*Anschauung*]. – You cannot bridge the gap that divides you from it; you have to decide for a leap” (Celan 1999, 125). And finally the third note: “The image here is no metaphor; this poetry is not emblematic [...] The image has a phenomenal character – it appears [*es erscheint*]” (Celan 1999, 87).

It is clear, then, that for Celan tropes and metaphors belong to a different order than images. Tropes and metaphors are of the level of the inauthentic and can be ascribed to the sphere called “art” by Celan in his speech, as clearly distinguished from “poetry.” The latter term has no separate realm of its own; the path to poetry must travel through the domain of art, the regions of tropes and metaphors, which is also the land of linguistic and semantic continuity. The place of poetry is reached at the extreme point of the absurd, where continuity is broken and the tropes and metaphors fall apart. It is precisely the place of the image, which springs from the break itself, and although it is spiritual and not visual, it has, nevertheless, the phenomenal character of something that appears. The image appears at the moment of linguistic crisis, on the tip of the tongue where language reaches a strange, synesthetic peak.

Celan’s sophisticated notion of the poetic image might instructively be related to Benjamin’s theory of the image that he defined as dialectical.<sup>4</sup> In his methodology of philosophical history as expounded in the prologue to the book on German mourning plays, Benjamin famously introduced the notion of origin as the true object of historical research. The origin is the form in which “the idea” appears in historical reality (GS1, 207–228). The idea itself is identical with what Benjamin calls the name and so it possesses a distinctly linguistic character; thus, in the first version of the prologue Benjamin explicitly states that the idea is not an image (GS1, 936). Now, developing and crucially modifying this methodology in the N file of the arcades project, Benjamin

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<sup>4</sup> Although Celan was a keen reader of Benjamin’s writings, in this particular case the parallel does not seem to point to any actual influence, as the Arcades materials remained unpublished during Celan’s lifetime.

equally famously replaced this notion of origin/idea with the notion of dialectical image. The category plays the same role of the ultimate object of historical investigation, but this time it is an image indeed, although it is not so much a visual, but rather a synesthethetic moment that appears "in language" (GS5, 577). The affinity between Benjamin's and Celan's notions of image turns out to be even closer than all this already suggests. For if the dialectical image is the isolated object of historical study torn out from historical continuity, which appears in the explosive encounter between past and presence in the Now of knowability, then according to the "Meridian" speech the poem is also an act of memory directed toward the "dates" crucial for the writing subject, the dates – in my reading – that appear in the poem precisely as images.

This idea of poetic image, especially when read as being in many ways parallel to Benjamin's theory, can help us define better the difference between Celan's universe and the world of Gadamer. Namely, we may now see that there is a striking contrast between the reading strategies that each advocates. Gadamer is convinced that when confronted with the fractured edifice of the modern poem, readers are to produce/discover for themselves the hidden semantic unity, which is deeper than the overt one, i.e., that readers are to understand the poem and thus join the hermeneutic community. By contrast, Celan himself urges us to follow the fragmentation to the point of extremity and identify the center of the poem as the image, which appears when all unity is broken. This image is not the subject of any understanding, as it is the incomprehensible itself. And the process of reading that aims at isolating and confronting such an image involves a decision, a leap, which is also a gesture of self-exclusion from any hermeneutic community. Moreover, the contrast between these two reading strategies points to a broader divergence between two visions of participation in history. Gadamer's is a vision of historical continuity in which readers, poets, and those whom they commemorate all participate in the same flow of the Word, whereas in Celan, clearly Benjamin's ally, the poetic act of memory demands a cut in the continuity of historical discourse, an isolation of the "date" marked by the poetic image, a break repeated and enhanced by the subsequent act of reading.

However, there is also a crucial difference between Celan and Benjamin, at least when it comes to the image that forms the breaking point of "Tenebrae": the image of shining.<sup>5</sup> The difference is linked to the question of name. In Benjamin, the appearance of the dialectical image is identical with the

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<sup>5</sup> The anatomy of the poetic image in Celan's poems varies quite considerably – and can considerably diverge from his own theory – so it is important to underline that I limit the discussion here to "Tenebrae."

epiphany of the name, the crystallization of the mimetic moment of language on the basis of its bourgeois, conventional aspect, the discovery of the Goethean *Urphänomen*, the absolutely singular substance that is a monadic spark of revelation. By contrast, there is nothing substantial about the image that stands at the center of “Tenebrae.” Rather, this image defines the moment of absolute hollowiness of language, capturing in one, singular point the bottomless pit of the ever-deepening loss and so – paradoxically, but accurately – the image can be seen as the name of the namelessness, or as marking the very spot where a name should be but is precisely – and painfully – missing. Here, again, we can see how Celan, moving away from the iconoclastic tradition of Judaism, which Scholem follows rather faithfully in his theory of lament, and resorting to something reminiscent of Christian iconophilia, is able to produce the effects of absence going far beyond the possibilities of iconoclasm: an empty image that reveals only the hollowed corpse of the word. It is this image that forms the very center of his broken lamentation.

But is there really such a thing as Celan’s lamentation? What remains of the structure of lament when all the elements that were so crucial for Scholem – the stability of revelation, silence untouched by the Fall, the communal transmissibility of silence, historical time, and the messianic horizon – when all these elements are gone for good? Perhaps answers to these questions can be found if we finally touch upon the demand in Celan’s poem that the Lord should pray to us. Certainly, this demand has many possible meanings, and many tones can be heard in it, including, I think, a threat. It is as if we were saying: “Pray to us; we are near to you, and so we are near to, always coming nearer to, the ultimate end; so pray to us, so that we do not come!” Whatever the meaning and tone, this injunction implies that now everything depends on us, even if we really cannot do much. And that if there is anything that resembles a prayer in what we do, our act is certainly not a prayer to God. Franz Kafka claimed famously that writing is a form of prayer. Commenting wittily on this dictum in his notes for the “Meridian” speech, Celan writes: “Also this means, first and foremost, not praying, but writing: one cannot do it with one’s hand folded” (Celan 1999, 157). Thus, writing can only be the “natural prayer of the soul,” as Malebranche defined “attention” in the dictum quoted in Benjamin’s essay on Kafka, later quoted by Celan in the final version of the “Meridian” speech (GS2, 432; Celan 1999, 9). In “Tenebrae,” as so often in Celan’s writing, this attention is directed toward loss, and so his poem should be seen as lamentation rather than prayer. Moving beyond the Scholemian universe of revelation and messianic promise, it defers the semantics of its speech; it tears apart its own language, which would like to close into mythical, unjust structures having too smooth a meaning; and it exposes its language to the terrify-

ing, singular moment of abysmal loss, marked ironically by the image of shining. Following the parallel with Benjamin's methodology of the Arcades project, we might say that the poem occurs in a higher form of presence, which might be called the "Now of lamentability." However, this very parallel suggests that there are hidden conditions of possibility of this almost-impossible text: its residual possibility must spring from there being, after all, some remnant of language that can produce the synesthetic effect of shining and hold the loss in one image; and there must also be a minimal temporal gap between Now and the moment of loss, a gap that enables us to mourn the Word that became corpse – but surely not resurrect it. And yet the fact that Celan's strange lamentations, of which "Tenebrae" is a crucial but certainly not the only example, must always start from scratch and always secure for themselves some remnants of possibility may be also the source of their advantage over Scholemian *Klage*, perhaps too safely guarded by its theological framework. To the ever-repeated, monotonous lamentations with which theology mourns our fallen condition in general, Celan opposes the eternally renewed acts of just, poetic attention for the singular loss: the eternally renewed, uninterrupted lament.<sup>6</sup>

### **Tenebrae**

Nah sind wir, Herr  
nahe und greifbar.

Gegriffen schon, Herr,  
ineinander verkrallt, als wär  
der Leib eines jeden von uns  
dein Leib, Herr.

Bete, Herr,  
bete zu uns,  
wir sind nah.

Windschief gingen wir hin,  
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken  
nach Mulde und Maar.

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

Es war Blut, es war,  
was du vergossen, Herr.

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<sup>6</sup> I allow myself to paraphrase the last sentence of the first section of Benjamin's essay on Karl Kraus: "To the ever-repeated sensations with which the daily press serves its public, he opposes the eternally fresh 'news' that are to be reported from the history of creation: the eternally renewed, uninterrupted lament" (GS2, 345).

Es glänzte.

Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.  
 Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.  
 Wir haben getrunken, Herr.  
 Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.

Bete Herr.  
 Wir sind nah.

Near are we, Lord,  
 near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,  
 clawed into each other, as if  
 each of our bodies were  
 your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,  
 pray to us,  
 we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,  
 went there to bend  
 over pit and crater.

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

It was blood, it was  
 what you shed, Lord.

It shined.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.  
 Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.  
 We have drunk, Lord.  
 The blood and the image, that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.  
 We are near.  
 trans. John Felstiner

(from *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Trans. John Felstiner. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, 103)

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Daniel Weidner

## **“Movement of Language” and Transience: Lament, Mourning, and the Tradition of Elegy in Early Scholem**

In December 1917, the young Gershom Scholem wrote an essay, “On Lament and Lamentation,” commenting on a translation of Lamentations that he had just finished.<sup>1</sup> The text is a concise five pages in print, and it makes wide-ranging assumptions about the nature of language and silence, and about revelation and mourning. Obviously, Scholem’s thoughts are related to a theory of language, in particular to the reflections on language that his older friend Walter Benjamin had developed in his famous essay “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man,” to which Scholem’s text is intended to answer. It is also quite clear that the text has a specific background in Scholem’s own quest for an authentic Judaism, since the lament he speaks about in the text is at least in part a lament for the ruin of Judaism in modernity. First and foremost, however, the text is composed of hermetic statements, and deliberately so. As I have shown elsewhere, Scholem intentionally adopts a form of esoteric writing that produces enigmatic statements which are difficult to understand. Pragmatically, this is due to the concrete situation of the text, which is directed to Benjamin and highlights the exclusive nature of their friendship by excluding other readers who would not be able to enter the realm of their mutual understanding. Epistemologically, the hermetic aphorisms that Scholem produces (like Benjamin’s own hermetic writing) contain important thoughts and tensions precisely through their condensed form: what cannot be said directly – what might even be paradoxical or aporetic – might nonetheless be hinted at indirectly.

For readers such as ourselves, who approach this text belatedly, this form of writing is both suggestive and frustrating, for it constantly points to a message that it conceals at the same time. If we take the hermetic nature of these writings seriously, which we ought to do, this poses a major methodological problem: we cannot apply the usual means of hermeneutic interpretation, i.e., trying to understand the inner logic of the text by paraphrasing the logic of its argument, relating the different concepts to each other and drawing conclusions that are implied but not actually made. For in a hermetic text, some of the components necessary for such an understanding will intentionally be

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1 On the context of the text, see Weidner 2003, 192–195.



missing, whereas other elements might simply be misleading.<sup>2</sup> We cannot understand such a text on its own terms, but we need to know more about its context, which is likely not explicit. Contexts, however, are infinite by definition, so we must decide on a particular context that seems fruitful for reading a specific text. In my interpretation of Scholem's text, I choose the context of poetry for both historical and systematic reasons.

Obviously, poetry plays a major role in the essay, as for instance when Scholem states that every lamentation may be put forward as poetry and that lament is for poetry what death is for life.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we should bear in mind that the essay is written as a commentary to the translation of *Lamentations*, i.e., as a paratext to an essentially poetic text. Finally, the addressee of the text, Benjamin, is also primarily concerned with poetry in these early years and probably conceived of himself more as a poet than as a critic, let alone as a philosopher of language. During the war years, the period of the most intense exchange between the two friends, Benjamin's own poetic activity was especially prolific, as evidenced by the series of sonnets dedicated to his deceased friend Fritz Heinle. These texts can be read as a work of mourning, thus being for poetry what death is for life. They constantly deal with the relations among beauty, loss, and poetry, in ways that both are highly conventional and point forward to Benjamin's reflections, as in the following line: "In aller Schönheit liegt geheime Trauer / Undeutlich nämlich bleibt sie immerdar" ["There is a secret mourning in all beauty / which remains indistinct forever."] (*GS*7.1, 53).<sup>4</sup> The constellation of beauty, lament, and ambiguity that this line evokes is part of the literary tradition of elegy. Elegy is not only a classical genre of lyrical poetry, with a long and complex history; it is also a cultural figuration of more general impact. Elegy configures religious, philosophical, and poetic ideas as well as practices and discourses into a pattern that is pregnant with meaning and coherent, but also complex and ambiguous. It is one of the central paradigms according to which German nineteenth-century culture conceives the relations of past and present, life and death, religion and poetry. It is this tradition, as I will seek to demonstrate, that implicitly determines what Scholem understood by "poetry," and thus by "lament," as an essentially poetic language, even if the question of beauty is rather downplayed in his conception.

There are also more general reasons to refer to the poetic model of elegy, rather than to any "systematic" concept in the philosophy of language. For at

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2 On the methodological problem of the interpretation of Scholem's esoteric texts, see Weidner 2006.

3 On the poetological theory of Scholem's early writings, see Weigel 2000, esp. 28–37.

4 On Benjamin's sonnets, see also the contribution of Caroline Sauter in this volume.

the beginning of the twentieth century, poetry had a privileged role with respect to the questions of loss, death, and mourning, which were of obvious interest for both Scholem and Benjamin. During the nineteenth century, these questions hardly resonated in the philosophical tradition, which was generally optimistic and forward-looking, whereas the question of the finitude of life had been central in the Jewish and Christian tradition and even in the eighteenth-century philosophy's concern with the immortality of the soul. As we will see, the problems of death and finitude found their place, rather, in the poetic tradition, and it is thus understandable that one would turn to poetry to articulate the experiences of finitude, of creaturely life, and of a materialist history.

By referring to the context of the classical German elegy, I do not claim that Scholem actually translated *Lamentations* as elegy, let alone that *Lamentations* are properly elegiac. Nonetheless, or rather precisely therefore, this tradition is the background from which Scholem begins his work of cultural translation between the Hebrew tradition and German poetry and poetics. His translation of *Lamentations* actually mirrors Scholem's own position between the two languages, and, if you will, between two cultures: the Hebrew one of the Biblical text and the German one of the language into which he translates. Taking this position into account, we will better understand certain ambivalences in Scholem's approach to elegy, such as those between loss and hope and between annihilation and continuity; and more generally we find an ambivalence regarding the role of religious tradition in the present, or the place of the subject vis-à-vis this tradition. In what follows, I will (1) briefly develop the standard model of modern elegy and (2) three deflative models that emerged during the nineteenth century, before I come back to (3) Scholem's reading of lamentation and (4) the way the elegiac model contributes to the constitution of his own intellectual and literary "voice."

## 1 Loss and immortality: The classical model of the elegy

The elegy as a literary genre goes back to classical Greece. Topically, the dual genealogy of the genre in the funeral lament and the lament of love already shows prefigured the negotiations about presence and absence, as well as the question of the poetic voice, that are typical of the genre.<sup>5</sup> For elegy is always

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<sup>5</sup> For a general overview of the genre, see Weisman 2010 and Weissenberger 1969, on the theory of passions implied in eighteenth-century elegy in particular, see Meyer-Sickendiek 2005, 115–146.

concerned with the question of how to address the deceased or the departed lover, or, more radically, how it is possible to speak anymore after such a loss. During the eighteenth century, elegy was discussed in psychological terms: the elegiac poem was understood to be written at the very moment when the poetic speaker gains a certain distance from its proper pathos and is able to give form to it. Accordingly, elegy consists of a certain motion, moving from longing for past happiness to a recognition of its loss, and finally to some form of consolation. Here, the poetic form has become a cultural model prescribing and regulating psychic processes. This model, which will become the important background for Scholem's as well as Benjamin's ideas of poetry and remembrance, consists less in a clear idea than in a specific form of language that will evolve during the classical phase of German literature around 1800.

Formally, the elegy's characteristic tensions of self-sustaining individuality and pathos and of love and absence are expressed by the elegiac distich, which is one of the key features of the genre in the classical tradition. Consisting of a hexameter and a pentameter line, the distich may be characterized by a certain irregularity and asymmetry, especially as the rhythmic flow comes to stasis in the caesura of the pentameter.<sup>6</sup> For example, Schiller's "Nänie" (1800) combines the typical form with the typical subject, namely the transience of beauty:

Auch das Schöne muß sterben! Das Menschen und Götter bezwinget,  
Nicht die ehernen Brust rührt es des stygischen Zeus.  
(Schiller 1987b, 242)

Even the Beautiful dies! It may conquer all gods and all humans,  
But with a bosom of steel Stygian Zeus is unmoved.  
(Schiller 2011, 11)

The inner tension of the distich may be worked out in very different directions. It can produce a series of distiches, thus forming an epic flow; it can stress the intensity of lyric expressionism, but it also tends to epigrammatic condensation, in which the distich will be isolated from its context. Schiller's poem uses all of these possibilities: it narrates a series of examples, stresses the weeping of the Gods, but ends, as so often is the case in Schiller, with an epigrammatic formulation:

Auch ein Klaglied zu sein im Mund der Geliebten, ist herrlich,  
Denn das Gemeine geht klanglos zum Orkus hinab.  
(Schiller 1987b, 242)

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<sup>6</sup> For metrical analyses, see Weissenberger 1969, 26–28 (for Schiller's "Nänie"), and 38–46 (for Hölderlin's "Menon's Lament for Diotima").

Yet a lament on the lips of those who have loved us in glory,  
Those who are common descend songless to Orcus' domain.  
(Schiller 2011, 12)

Here, the transformation from pure lament into consolation is performed poetically: knowing that one has taken part in beauty is the reason both for the lament and for its overcoming, since it is lament proper [*ein Klaglied*] that makes the loss bearable, whereas the "common" will vanish tonelessly. Here we can see how the possibility of objectifying the loss in the epigrammatic distich is related to the constitution of the poetic voice that will endure. Thus, elegy does the work of mourning, which is conceived as a form of reflection.

Schiller also articulates this figure in terms of the philosophy of history: as a figure of modernity, which is defined by the longing for classical beauty and unity, a longing that in turn is transferred into a process of reflective idealization.<sup>7</sup> Again, this figure can be expressed in terms of elegy, most prominently in Schiller's "Die Götter Griechenlands" ("The Gods of Greece," 1788/1790), in which he narrates the fate of modernity in the elegiac mode but not in elegiac meter. Christianity, and later the Enlightenment, have chased away beauty along with the Greek gods, which the poem laments. However, in the final stanza of the poem, the disappearance of the gods is supplemented by poetry, or rather, the death of the gods is the enabling condition of poetry, as the poem states at its end, again in epigrammatic condensation:

Was unsterblich im Gesang soll Leben  
Muss im Leben untergehen.  
(Schiller 1987a, 172)

Ah, that which gains immortal life in Song,  
To mortal life must perish!  
(Schiller 1844, 209)

This dictum epitomizes the elegy as a central cultural figuration of nineteenth-century German culture. It relates the death of the gods to their poetic afterlife and thus claims that poetry can substitute for religion – a figure that in itself has a strong Christian subtext. It postulates a relation between the past and the present in which poetry is a form of cultural memory, namely the reflexive restitution that has been lost. Finally, this implies a certain relation between poetry and philosophy, since the poem ends in a philosophical tone. In idealism, poetry and philosophy supplement each other to constitute a new secular piety, a religion of art and a faith in history, which is epitomized in nineteenth-

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7 On the historical conception of poetry implied, see Jauß 1970, esp. 95–102.

century historicisms. It is this idea of history that the young Scholem as well as the young Benjamin try to break with.

Arguably, the elegiac figuration, with its ambivalent and complex blending of nostalgia and progressive idealization, is far more characteristic of nineteenth-century attitudes toward time and history than are more straightforward philosophies of historical progress. In particular, it is closely related to the complex processes of secularization taking place during the nineteenth century: it is by this model of elegy that modern bourgeois society tries to come to terms with its finitude and its past after the loss of its properly religious beliefs and rituals. Especially the Jewish assimilation, too, tried to “idealize” its religious past, which now became a “cultural” heritage – at least this is the effect of the nineteenth-century Science of Judaism, according to Scholem.<sup>8</sup> Protesting against the bourgeois idea of history, namely against the idea that the past is transformed into memory by idealization, or that what lives immortally does so precisely because it is dead, Scholem wants to develop a different relationship toward the past, as well as toward religion and cultural identity.

## 2 Radical presence and fragmentation: Deflective traditions of elegy

However, the elegiac tradition not only contains a certain ambivalence, which renders it a particularly powerful but imprecise model; it also offers alternative models to the standard “idealist” model represented by Schiller. Not always does the sublation of lost religion into art work as smoothly as Schiller suggests – and, interestingly, these deflective models will serve as important resources for Benjamin and Scholem in figuring out their alternative conceptions of time and history. Three poets stand out that are particularly important for both: Friedrich Hölderlin, who was paradigmatic for Benjamin’s ideas on poetry and also an authority for Scholem; Heinrich Heine, whose political appropriation of the cultural heritage implicitly informs the Zionist project of which Scholem is a part; and Charles Baudelaire, whose radical modernization of the elegiac tradition reveals its critical potential. Before discussing the role that these models play in Scholem’s essay, we have to understand how they differ from the classical bourgeois model.

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<sup>8</sup> See Scholem 1997. Most pregnant is his stress that the founders of the *Wissenschaft* also have a “demonic” nature, which transformed their objects into specters, see 58–59.

Close to Schiller, and at first imitating Schiller's lyrics, Friedrich Hölderlin wrote elegies as "Menon's Lament for Diotima", which is both similar to and different from Schiller's "Nänie." As in Schiller's elegy, Hölderlin passes through different states of mind: remembrance of past happiness, recognition of loss, emphasis of the poet's loneliness, and finally, consolation. However, since Hölderlin characteristically combines personal experience with a mythological setting, the reflexive distance is smaller and the experience of loss is more extreme. Typically, this leads to paradoxical metaphors, such as the "rays of the night," an oxymoron that connotes the darkening of even the sun in grief, but also the dawn, the foreshadowing of a future to come. It is this future to come that is worked out in the last stanza:

Und wie, wenn ich mit ihr, auf sonniger Höhe mit ihr stand,  
Spricht belebend ein Gott innen vom Tempel mich an  
Leben will ich denn auch! schon grünt's! wie von heiliger Leier  
Ruft es von silbernen Bergen Apollons voran!  
Komm! es war wie ein Traum! die blutenden Fittiche sind ja  
Schon genesen, verjüngt leben die Hoffnungen all.  
(Hölderlin 1992, 271)

And, as before, when with her I stood on a sun-gilded hilltop,  
Quickening, to me now a god speaks from the temple within.  
I will live, then! New verdure! As though from a lyre that is hallowed  
Onward! from silvery peaks, Apollo's mountains ring out.  
Come, it was all like a dream, the wounds in your wings have already  
Healed, and restored to youth all your old hopes leap alive.  
(Hölderlin 1986, 239–241)

Here too, we have a return of the gods in poetry – but this is figured very differently than it was in Schiller. Hölderlin does not speak of an ideal return in memory, but of the gods rising again. The elegy changes to the hymnic mode, in that the poem directly addresses the gods. It is not a poem about the dead gods, but a poetic epiphany of the gods, or a prophetic elegy. Formally, this is expressed in the progressive dissolution of the distich and of the syntactic structure in general, which is typical for Hölderlin. What Norbert von Hellingrath called in 1911 "hard joining" [*harte Fügung*] isolates the word from the sentence structure (von Hellingrath 1936 [1911]). This implies that the epic and also reflexive moment is downgraded, as the unmediated combination of elegy and hymn, pathos and enthusiasm, shows: both moments of the classical elegiac dialectics are present, but they are no longer mediated by philosophical or historical reflection. Tellingly, there is no closing distich, since the final verses refer back to the long anaphoric and deictic construction of "Where ... Where":

[...] o bleibt, heilige Ahnungen, ihr  
Fromme Bitten! und ihr Begeisterungen und all ihr

Guten Genien, die gerne bei Liebenden sind;  
 Bleibt so lange mit uns, bis wir auf gemeinsamem Boden  
 Dort, wo die Seeligen all niederzukehren bereit,  
 Dort, wo die Adler sind, die Gestirne, die Boten des Vaters,  
 Dort, wo die Musen, woher Helden und Liebende sind,  
 Dort uns, oder auch hier, auf thauender Insel begegnen,  
 Wo die Unsrigen erst, blühend in Gärten gesellt,  
 Wo die Gesänge wahr, und länger die Frühlinge schön sind,  
 Und von neuem ein Jahr unserer Seele beginnt.  
 (Hölderlin 1992, 271)

[...] stay with us, holy Presentiments also,  
 Pious prayers, and you, Inspirations, and all of you kindly  
 Spirits who like to attend lovers, to be where they are.  
 Stay with us two until on communal ground, reunited  
 Where, when their coming is due, all the blessed souls will return,  
 Where the eagles are, the planets, the Father's own heralds,  
 Where the Muses are still, heroes and lovers began,  
 There we shall meet again, or here, on a dew-covered island  
 Where what is ours for once, blooms that a garden conjoins,  
 All our poems are true and springs remain beautiful longer  
 And another, a new year of our souls can begin.  
 (Hölderlin 1986, 241)

Here, nothing is said from a safe reflexive distance; the poem does not close on a general epigrammatic statement, on a moral, if you will, but it ends rather on a gesture and a movement of language, which Hölderlin describes theoretically as a combination of different tones.<sup>9</sup> It is thus the rise and disappearance of different forms of enunciation, as the elegiac and the hymnic, which make up the poem itself, a motion that cannot be brought to a standstill by any epigrammatic conclusion or philosophical idea.

Thus, for Hölderlin, the task of the elegy is not remembrance and idealization, but evocation that goes beyond reflexive discourse. The dissolution of syntactic form, however, always runs the risk of breaking up the poetic form altogether, a process that can be seen most clearly in Hölderlin's late poems, in which the "hard joining" often leads to the complete breakdown of the poem. The most famous example is the fragmented end of "Wie wenn am Feiertage" ["As if on a Holiday"], where Hölderlin finally does not complete the hymnic evocation of the poet as mediator of the gods and leaves the poem unfinished. Instead, using the last lines from the fragmented hymn, he begins to write another poem: the lyric and highly personal "Hälfte des Leben" ["Half

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<sup>9</sup> On Hölderlin's poetological theory of different tones, see Hamlin 2000.

of Life"]], which laments over a life that does not find completion.<sup>10</sup> Thus, from the ruins of the hymn emerge the melancholic lament, which deeply questions the power of the poetic voice to conjure the "gods."

I will briefly touch on two additional, alternative models of the elegy. Another deflection of Schiller's elegy can be found in the poetry of Heinrich Heine, whose poem "Die Götter Griechenlands" – obviously parodying Schiller's poem – relates how the poem sees the clouds as figures of the Greek gods: "Who once so joyfully ruled the world. / But now, driven out and wasted in death, / As huge apparitions wander away / In the midnight heaven" (Heine 1982, 15). Heine's gods are neither true gods nor ideal remembrances, but they are specters, which undercut the border between disappearance in life and presence in song: neither totally absent nor poetically brought back to life, they continue to haunt the present. In particular, they are collective specters that are part of a collective imagination, memories of a promised liberty and happiness that have not yet become reality. What they do represent, thus, is a political, polemical potential – as gods or as ghosts they might be conjured in the service of a rebellion against the existing order. Being suppressed, they represent a cultural unconscious that should not be hypostasized in elegiac idealization, but brought back to modern life by revolutionary profanation. For Scholem, this collective nature of the past, as a tradition onto which modern identity has to build, will always be of central importance, even in the vicissitudes of politics.

Finally, as a fourth model, Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "À une passante" does not refer to past happiness that went by, but to the mere *possibility* of happiness that has passed in the very moment of its appearance. Thus, the poem performs the idealization not as compensation for the loss of the object, but in advance, by a general melancholic gaze that conceives its objects as essentially passing by. Here, fugitiveness, which is central to the cultural figure of elegy, is taken to be absolute: it is no longer a supplement to beauty, but it is the very substance of beauty. Beautiful is what vanishes, and everything can be beautiful insofar as it is seen in passing by the poet's eye. Correspondingly, the poem is no longer addressed to any specific other, be it the gods or the lost love, but it remains a soliloquy. According to the German literary critic Karl Heinz Bohrer (1996, esp. 11–42), Baudelaire's poetry articulates a new, modern understanding of time as an empty continuum devoid of any compensation, which were implied by religious ideas of salvation, heroic ideals of eternal fame, and romantic musings about the past. Not offering anything like these

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<sup>10</sup> On the fragmentary nature of "Wie wenn am Feiertage," see Szondi 1978; on "Hälfte des Lebens," see Menninghaus 2005.



models of compensation, Baudelaire expresses a radical experience of loss that is peculiar to a form of poetry that becomes modern in the very moment it is detached from religious or philosophical discourse. Even if we do not agree with this radical, aestheticizing turn of Bohrer's argument, his reading confirms that poetry articulates the idea of loss differently than does philosophical discourse: it allows for the remembrance of all three models – the religious, the heroic, and the romantic – in the complex constellation of the elegiac tradition.

### 3 Eschatology and politics of lament: Scholem's reading of elegy into lament

These classical models of elegy outline the discursive space in which Benjamin and Scholem's discussion of lament unfolds. They form a constellation of the main elements<sup>4</sup> that will be decisive for the entire lifework of each thinker, as art, religion, and politics in their relation to language and history. In their deflected modes, Hölderlin, Heine, and Baudelaire also make up an alternative tradition that moves away from the bourgeois mainstream of nineteenth-century philosophy, including Neo-Kantianism. It is a tradition of a poetic afterlife that allows Benjamin and Scholem to rethink history and language, and, perhaps most importantly, to develop a distinctive theoretical tone. These models of elegy allow a closer look at Scholem's notes on lament as well as Benjamin's early notes on language and mourning. Here, however, I will focus solely on Scholem. In Scholem's essay on lament, we see how he tries to formulate a distinctive Jewish mode of lament that would depart from the bourgeois model of life, death, and beauty epitomized by Schiller, and we also see how he is confronted with the same ambivalences and ambiguities as in the deflected modes that we examined. Since this is more evident in the various notes from his diaries than in his essay on lament itself, these will play a significant role in the following analysis.

Of the four models, Hölderlin's is most important for Benjamin and Scholem. Benjamin develops his ideas on death and poetry and the polarity between death and mourning largely in reference to Hölderlin. In his early text, "Two Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin," he tries to show how Hölderlin surpasses the dualistic opposition between death and the poet, and transforms it into the unity of a dead poetic world. Hölderlin's idea of elegy is thus constitutive for the conception of poetry that Benjamin is about to develop. For Scholem, too, Hölderlin is not only a paradigmatic poet, but also an authority. In his notebooks, he wrote that Hölderlin led a "Zionist life from within the German peo-

ple" (*LY*, 311, undated 1919 entry); he has absolute authority matched only by the Bible: "Hölderlin and the Bible are the only two things that cannot contradict each other" (*Tb2*, 347).<sup>11</sup>

In the essay "On Lament and Lamentation," we find numerous echoes of Hölderlin's practice as well as his thought. Scholem's translation is obviously focused on the single word at the price of other features, such as meter or the acrostic form of Lamentations; as with Hölderlin's "hard joining," he tends to dissolve syntactic structures.<sup>12</sup> Again and again, Scholem stresses the ephemeral nature of language in lament, "language in transition" or "language of the border," which is never stable and never comes to a standstill of secure and ideal memory. By contrast, lamentation is marked throughout by "instability," which forces it into constant motion but always also runs the risk of breaking apart, just as language in the late Hölderlin tends to break apart into fragments.

I do not want to suggest that this requires that Scholem read Hölderlin and followed his ideas – in other words, that Hölderlin was an "influence" in the proper, positivist sense. As I have tried to argue, elegy is rather a much more general cultural figuration, a context inscribed in the cultural and poetic tradition. Thus, the traces of Hölderlin in Scholem are less interesting in themselves than as deflections of the dominant model of the bourgeois elegy; what Scholem actually does is to search for alternative concepts of art and of history by referring to alternative traditions in relation to the eschatology, the politics, and the poetology of lamentations.

The deflection is perhaps most obvious in relation to the elegiac idea of time and history. Unlike the classical model of the elegy, lamentation, he claims, does not end with closure but goes on endlessly: it is infinite language, it is monotonous, it does not know any answer. Lamentation does not immortalize the lost by an organic poetic form, but it transforms the loss into an endless movement of language in order to evoke some form of presence that goes beyond an idealized memory. Thus, immediately the eschatological question arises: what is the hope that comes from lamentation, and what is it that lamentation evokes?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> All citations from *Tb* in English are my translations, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup> Scholem mentions "hard joining" in the introduction to his translation of a medieval lament, *Sha'ali Serufa*. In his translation he also does not attempt to duplicate the rhyme-scheme of the original; "the rhyme of these poems [the Zionide laments] is a symbol of the general infinity of lament" but is not to be translated directly (*Tb2*, 607). English translations of Scholem's introduction to the lament and the lament itself are given elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Exegetically, this is the question of how the different parts of lamentations are related; see Westermann 1974, Westermann 1990, and Linafelt 2000, esp. 1–18.

Scholem seems to be somewhat ambivalent on this point. In his notes, he stresses that lament is “mythic” and therefore devoid of any future, but that Judaism was able to integrate it by relating it to “teaching” (as the essay argues) or to “hope” (as put forth in other notes). A particularly interesting passage from the notebooks states that it is the integration of a “prophetic element, namely hope” that allowed lament to be included in Jewish literature: “After the word was annihilated, in the end, from the ashes of the burning of lamentations arises the new messianic word. Without this, lamentation would never find a place in Judaism, for its lack of consolation [*Trostlosigkeit*] would have destroyed it” (*Tb2*, 391). Again, it is the annihilating character of language that dissolves meaning and gives rise to new hope. This hope is necessary since otherwise, “it” would have been destroyed – note that the “it” is highly ambivalent in the German original, since it can refer both to lament and to Judaism. Hopeless lament, as this ambivalence suggests, would destroy itself, but it would also destroy Judaism. As lamentation, it would fall apart completely and find neither form nor return; with respect to Judaism, this breaking apart of poetic form might also be destructive. This also suggests that the eschatology of elegy remains unstable and endangered, and therefore fundamentally alien to any idealized, stable memory. If, for Hölderlin, the pagan elegy was a language of gods in a godless age, lament seems to play a similar role for Scholem: it allows for the continuation of the teaching of God precisely by running the risk of dissolution and silence.

But the eschatology of lament is not the only layer that is relevant for Scholem’s text. No less important is the political moment, which we might compare to the third mode of elegy, namely to Heine. In his diaries Scholem stresses the communal nature of lament much more explicitly than in the essay itself: “There is no one who laments individually, who laments lamentation [*der die Klagen klagte*]. The lamenting ego is nothing but the national. The people lament and are allowed to lament by testified laws, no individual has the right to do so. That is a problem in Job and the third lamentation. [...] The wailing Woman is the paradigm of people” (*Tb2*, 388). True community – thus, a lamenting community – would be able to relate to its past in a different way than the modes embodied in the heroic commemoration of dead fathers, or melancholic bourgeois remembrance.

This political notion of lament, emphasizing its essentially communal nature, along with Scholem’s growing skepticism toward current politics, raises some doubts concerning the role of poetry in this process. Already in 1918, Scholem had written that the collective nature of classic and medieval laments make them different from their modern renewals: “Therefore, the modern lamentations of lyric are no lamentation in the deepest sense. [...] The pure, con-

tentless lamentation belongs to the community" (*Tb2*, 389). He criticizes Möricke and Rilke, but also Bialik, for individualizing lament, for pretending to speak in the name of the people but in the end speaking purely subjectively.

The political moment of lament, however, is highly problematic, since the essential instability of lament entails that it always runs the risk of falling back into mythic violence. This happened not only with Hölderlin's poetry when read as an evocation of a true German nation, but to some extent with Jewish lament as well, as Scholem experienced when translating (from Yiddish to German) *Yiskor*, a memorial book for Jewish settlers who died in the early Yishuv. This book makes an important shift, away from the martyrological conception of suffering and toward the image of the heroic Jewish fighter, a shift with which Scholem was obviously quite unhappy. He was intrigued in particular by what he calls a "continuous disgusting mixing of spheres": by its title and form, the book refers to traditional Jewish lament, but it by no means laments the victim, instead displaying "the childish pleasure that he belongs to us" (*Tb2*, 144). The book, in other words, is an ideological appropriation of the religious tradition, and its ideology of heroic death is nothing but a dangerous "catchphrase."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the political potential of lament, which is related to its eschatological power, is inherently dangerous. One of the last texts from Scholem's diaries, a manuscript dated April 1923, highlights this danger as well as the gulf between Scholem's idea of the political and politics proper. Entitled "The Truth," the text states that what the Zionist truly lacks is the ability to lament: "The security of a common future obscures the view into the abyss of mourning that yearns in the midst of all Jewish history, in the heart of all Jewish phenomena" (*Tb2*, 712). This idea will echo again and again in Scholem's later texts, as in his letter from of 1 August 1931 to Benjamin, in which he laments that the Zionist was too successful in his practical politics: "We have won too early"; "Our Aim was destroyed when it became visible" [*Das Sichtbarwerden unserer Sache hat sie zerstört*] (Scholem 1997, 216 ff.). Nonetheless, in 1923 Scholem still places high hopes on lament as such: "When Zionism will have learned how to lament, it will be more than a hope, it will have redeeming power upon our souls" (*Tb2*, 712). The restitution of language might still be possible, this past

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14 "In Germany one speaks in catchphrases and no longer has the courage to do anything; in Palestine, one dies for catchphrases. What is worse?" (*Tb2*, 144). The reflections on "propaganda" that Scholem develops in this context play an essential role in his conception of Sabbatianism, which he understands as the propagation of teachings that should have remained esoteric. On Scholem's ideas on propaganda, see Weidner 2003, 91–95; on his logic of misunderstanding, also see Weidner 2003, 385–388.

might still come back, there might still be a form to relate to it, neither as merely antiquarian memory nor as expected future, but as a life of lament.

## 4 The lamenting voice: Writing as inscribing oneself into tradition

Thus, lament seems to represent a possibility of relating to the past that neither spiritualizes this past into mere memory, nor tries to realize it straightforwardly as political action. Lament would not give up the claims of the past, nor ask for their immediate realization, but rather it would raise hope. However, this is a small and silent hope, difficult to articulate, the object of esoteric teaching only. Scholem's texts from the 1920s, in which Scholem relates lament to hope, bear a certain resignation; moreover, they are even more esoteric than the youthful essays, such as "On Lament and Lamentation." With paradoxical titles, such as "If We Could Tell How We Become Zionists" or "To My Pupils that I Do Not Have," these texts explicitly turn away from their readers and deny the addressee that the "Lament" essay at least saw in Benjamin.<sup>15</sup> By their framing, and by their increasingly esoteric style, these texts raise the question of how one can speak at all in the current situation of desolation – this is the question of the "poetic voice," which, especially in the elegiac genre, is always concerned with tension between the necessity to speak and its impossibility, always implies a fundamentally endangered voice.

Obviously, this question also haunts the Biblical book of Lamentations, which is deeply concerned with the problem how to speak in the situation of desolation: after catastrophe, when all institutions of Jewish culture and practice are destroyed and the fundamental situation of a covenant between the people of Israel and its God seems to be abrogated – how is it possible to speak any more? What can you speak about if everything is destroyed? To whom can you speak when the primal addressee is absent? Thus, the book can be understood as a gradual reconstitution of the Jewish voice via different rhetorical and poetical strategies.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the book is more than appropriate for the young Scholem to read and comment on, since he writes not only after assimilation, i.e., after what in his eyes is a catastrophe of Jewish identity. He himself must find a

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<sup>15</sup> On this progressive esotericism, see Weidner 2003, 85–103.

<sup>16</sup> On the poetics of lamentations, see Mintz 1984, esp. 35–41.

position in the desolate present, and this is the project that is probably most important for the young Scholem. He is, in other words, in quest of a voice; he wants to speak with a distinctively Jewish voice, even as he realizes how difficult that is under the conditions of modernity. The paradigm of lament, as well as the elegiac tradition, strongly contributes to this project.

The quest for a voice is at first a quest for a style of writing. Therefore, in his diaries, he constantly complains that he is unable to write, at least to write seriously, a lament that is probably typical for the youthful diarist, if not for the diarist as such, who tends to blame the diary as being a poor substitute for a more serious work, as does Kafka. Like Kafka, but much more decidedly, Scholem tends to interpret this situation: "I feel in my own life the legitimacy of the prohibition to write down the oral teachings very clearly." Or put differently: "No Jew is able to express the last and most important things in written and writeable language" (*Tb1*, 200). By alluding to the "oral Torah," Scholem gives his non-writing a distinctively Jewish touch. This opens up the possibility of a Jewish existence not only by not writing, but also of a Jewish writing, namely of writing as the oral teaching; and a lot of Scholem's notes obviously do that, as they imitate the allusive and laconic style of traditional Jewish writing. Moreover, by yet another twist, Scholem re-inscribes this writing into tradition, which may be most concisely put in a thesis he intended to send to Walter Benjamin: "Written tradition is the paradox in which Jewish literature essentially unfolds" (*Tb2*, 302).<sup>17</sup> This sentence does several things at the same time. First, it refers to the historical tradition and to the paradox that the oral tradition has indeed been written and is even canonized. Second, the thesis refers to Scholem's difficulty in becoming part of the tradition – the paradox of writing as if he belonged to tradition. Finally, it talks about itself: by claiming to be traditional in its written form, yet at the same time confessing to be mere writing, the thesis performs what it speaks of: an act that is possible only by the terse form of the thesis and by its elusion of context.

The esoteric style of these notes thus has a precise function: it allows one to speak when one is principally not able to speak, it allows one's voice to be raised while facing a general loss that both disconnects one from the past, and allows one to address it differently. Viewed from this perspective, Scholem's theoretical notes are less statements *about* Judaism, let alone parts of a "theory" or a "system" of Judaism, as they are an attempt to "speak Jewishly": to become part of the Jewish tradition *and* to raise his voice as an individual, to become a legitimate speaker of Judaism. Experience confirms that this way of

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17 On this passage, see Weidner 2006.

speaking, both in elegiac poetry and in the esoteric parts of the Jewish tradition, necessarily involves moments of silence and self-enclosure, echoed in the hermetic gestures of Scholem's texts.

Given these tensions, we can finally understand both Scholem's use of the elegiac tradition and his approach to lament. Like Benjamin, Scholem envisions a history that is founded upon mourning and lament rather than idealized memory, upon the melancholic semantic of elegy rather than the heroism of tragedy. At the same time, these tensions also determine the poetics of the text proper: tensions among openness, ambivalence, and closure. This may be most clear in the closing lines about the fall of language and the unfallenness of silence:

Solange die Unantastbarkeit des Schweigens nicht gefährdet ist, so lange werden Menschen und Dinge klagen, denn eben dies macht ja den Grund unserer Hoffnung auf Restitution der Sprache, auf Versöhnung aus: daß zwar die Sprache den Sündenfall erlitten hat, das Schweigen aber nicht. (*Klage*, 133).

So long as the inviolability of silence is not threatened, men and things will continue to lament, and precisely this constitutes the grounds of our hope for the restitution of language, of reconciliation: for, indeed, it was language that suffered the fall into sin, not silence. (*Lament*, 391)

With these lines, Scholem's text ends with a strong gesture, raising the previously unmentioned topic of the fall and turning it around by claiming the unfallenness of silence, a turn that seems to protest against Benjamin's argument about the loss of pure language. The last sentence, nearly a distich in form – (compare with Schiller's "Was unsterblich im Gesang soll leben / muß im Leben untergehn") – almost draws a moral. Scholem obviously wants to find a stopping-place here, and he does so by semantic and syntactic closure: by producing a canonical sentence, suggestive and inviting to quote. However, a closer look reveals some ambivalences that undercut the apodictic statement and reveal the inner tensions of the text – some details do not fit into a simple, dogmatic understanding and point toward a more complex, poetic content in what has been said. One of these details is the use of the first-person plural, in "our hopes," which is only the third time that the text leaves the constative tone of the third person and indicates a deictic gesture, a performative moment in the text. We could read this exceptional first-person statement as making an appeal to Benjamin, with whom Scholem wanted to share this hope on the common ground of their friendship. It could also be the text's farewell to its readers, which would imply that, after reading, we share this hope and thus belong to the hermetic community of those to whom this text is addressed. Finally, it could be understood as a last attempt to "speak Jewishly," which

shifts from the constative mode – (just some lines before, he spoke of “this people”) – to the “we” that shares a necessary hope and will thus continue to survive in lamentation. Given these possibilities and the ambiguities they involve, “das Schweigen aber nicht” no longer appears as an apodictic metaphorical verdict, but as a much more ambivalent gesture that combines language and silence and – in a contamination – might be expressed as follows:

Der Rest ist “Schweigen aber nicht” – The rest is “silence did not”

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- Lament* “On Lament and Lamentation.” Trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. 313–319 in this volume. For German original, see *Klage* above.
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Section Six:  
**Mourning, Ruin and Lament**



Rebecca Comay

# Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet

## 1 Lamenting lament

Lament is at first glance a performative speech act like any other: it enacts the grief it speaks of and thus ineluctably *does* what it *says*.<sup>1</sup> But its performativity is peculiar. Rather than expressing the potency of language – its ability to produce the state of affairs it designates (I baptize you, I order you, I marry you, etc.) – the lament points to an impotence or undoing that erodes the sinews of both speech and action. While the possibility of malfunction or “infelicity” is built into every speech-act as the structural condition of its own success (strictly speaking, my promise counts as one only if it can be broken; my command has authority only if it can be disregarded, etc.), the lament takes failure or dissatisfaction as its premise. Infelicity – muteness – is not just a contingent possibility of lament but its founding condition. The expression of loss is bound to a loss of expression that escalates with every measure to staunch it.

This seems paradoxical. What creates the plangency and tenacity of lament is precisely what frustrates and disables it. Caught between the turbulence of grief and the conventionality of its expression – between singularity and stereotype, between immediacy and repetition, between the natural and the artificial – lament arises in the neuralgic zone where all these oppositions become uncertain. It tugs at the boundary between private and public, between nature and culture, between the dead and the living. In confounding these distinctions, it reveals a disturbance at the heart of the symbolic order.

It's not so much its own sincerity or authenticity that lament puts into question (this would mark its subtle distance from more overtly self-referential and stylized genres of mourning, like elegy, for example) as its very authority: lament

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful for the detailed comments on this essay by Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel. I'm also grateful to Paula Schwebel and Vivian Liska for the invitation to the Antwerp conference where I gave the original talk on which this paper draws, and to Iain Macdonald, Alison Ross, Rob Kaufman, and Claudia Welz for the invitations to present it at the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy, the New School/Monash workshop on aesthetics in New York, the Berkeley Program in Critical Theory, and the Theological Faculty at the University of Copenhagen. This essay has benefited enormously from the discussion at these events, and from the additional comments of Jay Bernstein, Gregg Horowitz, Mary Nyquist, Alison Ross, and Rebekah Smick, as well as numerous conversations with Ian Balfour.

demands an acknowledgment that it knows to be fundamentally impossible. This is because lament is not only an expression of pain but also an uneasy claim to legitimacy. This is why it's so often bound up with awkward issues of rights and responsibilities, inclusion and exclusion, privilege and entitlement, pedigree and inheritance; why it gets drawn into the anxious circuitry of mimetic rivalry (think of Hamlet and Laertes in the graveyard); why it displays such strange and counterintuitive forms of sociability (why it can be delegated, performed in proxy, hired out to professionals, why it seems to belong to everyone and no one, why it gets enmeshed in the tangles of prestige and status, why it can be borrowed, stolen, co-opted, hoarded, shared, envied, commanded, prohibited, refused, evaded); why it so easily gets harnessed to institutional and political narratives of foundation, legitimation, and perpetuation; and why it provokes such jarring measures of regulation. It can introduce yet another ingredient into the cocktail of uncomfortable and incompatible emotions: shame. It can be both humiliating and distasteful to have to go through such endless negotiation and uncertainty about an experience so self-evident, urgent, and incontrovertible. There is something mortifying in every sense about the escalating self-scrutiny – the “I think” that accompanies every act of mourning. Performative contradiction is the last thing one should be worrying about when one is grieving.

In this respect lament is much like any other speech-act – just a little more so. Its antinomies are just the antinomies of language itself. All language is precarious: every claim to legitimacy is fragile, every self-expression tinged with a whiff of theatricality, every speech-act shadowed by the specter of repetition. Lament is nothing special in this regard, it's just an extreme case of the tension that afflicts every act of speaking, but it pushes this dissonance onto center stage and raises the pitch and volume to maximum intensity. This is one of the things that can make other people's laments so hard to endure and one's own so endlessly absorbing.

Freud touches on this issue in *Mourning and Melancholia* when he briefly interrupts himself to remark on a puzzling feature of melancholia: there's an excessive, unaccountable loquaciousness bordering on exhibitionism – an intrusive, insistent “communicativeness,” *eine aufdringliche Mitteilbarkeit* – that seems to energize the melancholic even as it unfailingly aggravates everyone around him (Freud 1955, 247). So much over-sharing can be oppressive in its exorbitant demands. Despite his offhand tone, Freud is not being entirely dismissive, and we shouldn't get too derailed by his own relatively trivial examples (although notably he will also mention Hamlet in this context). The “insistent communicativeness” points to a structural paradox that only Adorno (and to a lesser extent Levinas) will be able to articulate fully: the very thing

that seems most to isolate us, to tear us away from the world, that can't and doesn't want to be shared, that seems to impede all connection and even to repel others with its relentless self-absorption and uncompromising drivenness – that is, pain itself – is the very basis of our most profound social bond. Suffering at once excludes and impinges on other people with its exorbitant ethical “insistence.”

An extreme is a kind of exception; it works at once by exaggeration and by demarcation or delimitation. It illuminates by magnifying or inflating the norm; and by staking out the outer limits of what is normal it overshoots and defies this norm. Lament is a boundary phenomenon in just this sense: in its intrusive loquacity it simultaneously presents a hypertrophic case of language and challenges language's basic operating rules. This is because as a speech-act it strains the very idea of legitimation. Lament demands a social validation that grates against its own repellantly antisocial character. It is tormented by a kind of “social asociability” (to invert Kant's enigmatic expression). It needs its essential incommunicability to be communicated, or, what might amount to the same thing, for its communicability to be non- or ex- or actively uncommunicated. As such, it points to something dissonant within the cognitive apparatus of all language. Lament marks the place where recognition itself loses traction as a normative concept; it sheds its self-evidence and normative authority, whether as condition, desideratum, or regulative ideal. Lament is a limit case of language that forces us to reconsider everything we take most for granted when we speak.

Despite appearances this sometimes produces strange forms of solidarity and can lead to peculiar sorts of community.

Every lament is shadowed by the specter of its own insufficiency, redundancy, or inappropriateness – too much, too little, too soon, too late (the very terms of measure, the relentless pressure to compare and quantify, already suggesting a fundamental mismeasure) – and this dissonance only escalates when mourning is forced to tally among its own losses the essential context of recognition that might have made mourning itself either authorized or even visible as such. This accounts for the reflexive intensification and proliferation of lament, the uncomfortable slide from “plaint” to “complaint” – from grief to grievance, from *Klage* to *Anklage* (Nietzsche and Freud both remark on this semantic slippage) – but also underscores its intractably ethical and social stakes (Freud 1955, 248; Nietzsche 1996, 229). Even as it chokes on its own impossibility, the very act of lament indicts a world in which lament itself would be stifled. Antigone, Hecuba, Hamlet – the list continues – make explicit the political stakes of

such stifling. This implies that lament itself can be a political intervention. We see this every time a funeral ignites into a demonstration, or whenever police take measures to ensure that it doesn't.

In mourning the dead I am also taking exception to the fact or threat of mourning's own loss of legitimacy, and even to the fact that it should need legitimation in the first place. Amplifying my grief is a protest against the symbolic order that would discipline or silence this grief – the prohibitions, inhibitions, and disavowals that can conspire to make loss seem negligible and sorrow inadmissible. Lament in such cases redoubles. It becomes a lament for the proscribed or eroded rituals that might have once contained lament and made it legible as such, for the desecrated graveyard that might have provided it with a visible marker, for the sacked temple or city that could have given it a social context and physical setting.

This is one of the paradoxes of a Biblical text like Lamentations, and contributes to its strange blend of rawness and formality. The text has to be recited in the absence of the temple in which it needs to be recited: it has to formally compensate for its own missing ritual basis. The only consolation, if there were one, would be the deadly persistence of language itself in its relentless, mechanical monotony – the endless repetition of a question posed from nowhere, addressed to no one, and without expectation of any answer.<sup>2</sup> The rigid architectural of the poem – its acrostics, its repetitions, its serial accumulations – keeps gesturing weakly toward an absent or eroded architecture. If lament keeps folding in on itself, if it keeps circling around its own impossibility, this is because loss has multiplied to the point of disabling even the commemorative mechanisms that could have marked its occurrence.

There's of course a cartload of contingent historical reasons for this disabling, ranging from catastrophic to boring – persecution, secularization, the stupid force of entropy and oblivion. In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin provides a rigorous account of (one instance of) this historical predicament and explores its startling aesthetic consequences: the Reformation unleashes a torrent of grief that can neither terminate nor find a proper format. But Benjamin complicates things immensely and almost unmanageably by insisting that there's a structural reason for this impasse as well. Although contingent in their specific manifestations, both the grief and the blockage go all the way

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<sup>2</sup> Lamentations (the book) turns every question into a "rhetorical" question that has the illocutionary force of an accusation. *How, eikhah* (could this be happening); *how, eikhah* (could you, God, let this happen); *how, eikhah* (could you be silent in the face of such questions)? For a splendid discussion of the grammar of the interrogative in Biblical lament, see Halberthal's essay in this volume.

down. Benjamin suggests that the antinomy of lament is at once contingent and structural. In its extreme form – for philosophical reasons it's only the extremes that interest Benjamin<sup>3</sup> – lament falls into a reflexive paroxysm that strangles it at both ends. It's muted at one end by the contingent forces of history. And it's muted at the other by the inescapable pressure of historicity as such.

The dilemma that preoccupies Benjamin, in other words, is both peculiarly modern and ineluctably “primordial.” It pertains both to the specific challenges of secularization and to the most intractable dilemmas of “creaturely life.” Modernity's curse and privilege is to repeat, to intensify, and (this is Benjamin's gamble) even to redeem a catastrophe that was from the outset always already underway. By drawing these two moments into proximity Benjamin is both at his most conventional and at his most daring.<sup>4</sup>

In arguing both points (in the *Trauerspiel* book he seems to do so simultaneously), Benjamin courts two complementary dangers: he risks either lapsing into historicism or leaping toward some kind of weirdly ahistorical metaphysical foundation – most likely both. In a different register, we could talk about the twin dangers of empiricism and formalism. In yet another, more in keeping with Benjamin's own vocabulary, we could speak of the antinomy of materialism and theology. Adorno once famously described these two poles (or a related pair) as the “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.”<sup>5</sup> At the risk of exacerbating this tear, I want to explore its edges.

So my question is twofold. The main part (this will be the focus of the section to follow) concerns a specific historical impasse. The historical conundrum is straightforward enough, as conundrums go: it relates to the unfinished business of modernity. Secularization induces a mourning that it systematically

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3 On the epistemological function of the “extreme” see the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to *OG*, 31, 47, and 57.

4 Benjamin will invoke a seemingly similar eschatological pattern in the *Passagenwerk*, much to Adorno's annoyance, although with notably different termini: he will famously define the dialectical image as the explosive encounter between the “most recent past” and the “primal past” [*Urgeschichte*], where the conjuncture ignites the messianic spark of redemption. For a succinct formulation see the 1935 exposé to the *Passagenwerk* in *Arcades*.

5 Cf. Adorno's well-known letter to Benjamin of 18 March 1936, published in Livingstone et al. 2007, 123. Adorno of course is referring to the dichotomy between autonomous art and whatever its antithesis is supposed to be, but I think that this opposition is in turn best understood against the backdrop of Adorno's concurrent critique of the *Passagenwerk*, where he infamously insists that Benjamin inject his “wide-eyed positivism” with a dose of “more theology.” For an elaboration, see Comay 2005.



(theologically, institutionally, etc.) stifles and thus instantly redoubles: it dishes out a loss that it immediately compounds by blocking every channel of mediation. Which is to say, we are in the well-trodden territory of trauma: it repeats.

The other part of my question is structural. This part is gnarly and headache-inducing, so I'll get this bit over with right away. It pertains to the antinomies of language in a postlapsarian universe (Benjamin also subtly forces the question as to whether there could ever have been another), and in order to approach this question we have to descend into the rabbit hole of Benjamin's earliest and most opaque ruminations on language – of God, of man, of things, of nature, as such, pure, fallen, and whatever any other kind there might also happen to be. Here again we find ourselves within the region of trauma, but of a much more inscrutable and seemingly intractable sort.

In his early writings Benjamin points to a choking at the very origin of language – a constitutive impediment that seems to keep speech forever stammering and stalling on its own threshold.<sup>6</sup> The blockage is structural and proleptic: it signals a mourning in advance of any specific occasion for mourning, and triggers a lament directed toward the very possibility of lament as such – a kind of “repetition forward” (to adapt Kierkegaard's language). Prior to any specific event, preceding every historically induced catastrophe, in advance of history itself, language is forever straining toward a lament that is continually stifled mid-throttle. In advance and as if in anticipation of any determinate loss, even before it has even been recognized or legitimized as language in the first place, language is always already engaged in staging its own self-loss – a kind of “primordial repression,” so to speak.<sup>7</sup>

Here is the paradox in a nutshell. Once it is necessary to lament, there can be no possibility of doing so; by this very token it is always necessary, and thus impossible, and therefore all the more necessary, to lament, and so on ... Lament is either superfluous (were it possible to lament, there would be no need to) or impossible (the very need to lament is precisely the obstacle to being able to), and this double bind is in itself sufficient to merit lamentation. What is most to be lamented is the impossibility of lamentation. What is lamentable, in other words, is strictly unlamentable; what demands lament is simultaneously what precludes it.

The aporia is structural and transhistorical – or rather, it marks the traumatic transition from nature to history proper. Benjamin backdates the double bind to the expulsion from Eden if not before – a catastrophe that he character-

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<sup>6</sup> See note 10 below.

<sup>7</sup> For why this anticipation is not preemptive or apotropaic, see note 11 below.

izes above all as a disaster of language. The Fall marks the transition from the paradisiacal language of names (non-referential, non-communicative, non-instrumental) to the language of signs (arbitrary, utilitarian, extrinsic); from the immediacy of “knowing,” as intransitive *Erkennen*, to the abstraction of judgment, as transitive, objectifying *Wissen*. Adamic “naming” atrophies or rather hypertrophies into an “over-naming” [*übernennen*] – an excess of nomination that attests to the henceforth irreparable breach between words and things as between meaning and matter. Too many names – the arbitrariness of the sign – is tantamount to no names at all: the Fall thus inflicts on mute nature a deforming and second-degree muteness, a *Verstummen*, all the more grievous for being strictly ungrievable.

And thus the paradox: nature mourns its own muteness and thereby compounds it. “Because it is mute,” writes Benjamin in 1916, “nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this sentence leads even deeper into the essence of nature: the mournfulness of nature *makes* it mute.”<sup>8</sup> This chiasitic formulation will be incorporated verbatim a decade later into the *Trauerspiel* book. “It is a metaphysical truth,” writes Benjamin in the same essay, “that all of nature *would begin to lament* if it were endowed with language” (*Language*, 72). (This is a strange use of the conditional: even were it to be realized, lament would remain essentially embryonic or unrealized.)

Benjamin goes on to unpack the circular implications of this statement in two distinct (so he says) directions. First, nature “would lament [about, *über*] language” (*Language*, 72). It would namely lament the lack of a language in which it *could* even begin to lament, as if the only possible topic of discussion could be the failure or impossibility of having such a language. Second, and more enigmatically, nature “would lament” *simpliciter*: it would just – lament, without further specification.

The distinction between these two sentences is subtle but important. In the first proposition, a minimal gap still distinguishes lament from its own missing language. The second sentence withdraws even this minimal, negative object relation: lament would unfold in the absence of every actual or possible object. In this deepened state of mourning there could be no lost object: not even language could present itself to itself as its own missing object. This is not because lament would have become autotelic or self-sufficient – as if it could somehow compensate or console itself for its own absence by *becoming* the very thing it lacked (in the manner of a fetish).<sup>9</sup> On the contrary: lament

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<sup>8</sup> For comparable formulations see “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” (SW1, 60) and OG, 224 ff. All emphases are mine.

<sup>9</sup> Despite appearances, this intransitivity of lament has nothing to do with the preemptive or compensatory structure that Agamben suspects as being essential to the fantasy structure of

would have become so identified with its own failure that any specification would have become either impossible or redundant or both. In the face of such melancholy, no relation – no positivity, determinacy, or objectivity – could remain intact.

## 2 Post-mortem Hamlet

Benjamin's depiction of the historical trauma of the Reformation is starkly drawn. The devastation is expressed physically in the ruined landscape of war-torn Europe, institutionally in the confessional splintering of Christianity, politically in the evisceration of sovereign authority. And it manifests itself culturally in the eclipse of every eschatological narrative that might have made sense of any of that. Religious wars have a way of doing this: more and more corpses to bury, accompanied by an increasing perplexity about how exactly to bury them.

In disenchanting the world, in stripping the earthly realm of all transcendence, Luther had simultaneously disenchanted every ritual that might have provided solace for this disenchantment. The dilapidation extends to the cultural practices that might have contained the dilapidation. This is why funerals during this period become such a hotly contested topic: the whole set of relations between the living and the dead – between this world and the next, between the human and the divine – is being renegotiated.

In a linguistic register, the trauma is marked as a crisis of symbolization. The disenchantment of the world introduces a fissure in the natural order: a “jagged line of demarcation” henceforth separates being from meaning (*OG*, 166). Stripped of spiritual density, the world is experienced as a junkyard or “charnel house” of hollowed-out artifacts – a heap of empty, vibrating husks

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melancholia itself. Agamben suggests that the construction of a virtual and unspecified loss is a method of staving off real loss. It allows me to forge an imaginary negative object-relation that will mask the real absence of any possible object. The experience of “loss” is cultivated, embellished, and publicized as a way of asserting a retroactive claim to an ownership that was never mine. I set out to “lose” the object precisely in order to stake my claim. Benjamin's grammar, in contrast, hints at a loss prior to my having had anything to lose – a strictly non-relational or “absolute” negativity in excess of every possible appropriation. In its intransitivity lament blocks the installation of all object relations (even retroactive, negative, and narcissistic ones), and is in this sense incapable of functioning as an alibi for its own pacification. See Agamben 1993, and for a counterargument Comay 2006. Thanks to Ilit Ferber for asking me to elaborate on this point in this context.

bereft of immanent meaning, truth, and value (*OG*, 232). Cut off from any divine guarantor, language itself is reduced to a buzzing commotion of outlived and arbitrary signifiers, each jostling for attention as it awaits semantic reassignment through allegorical investment. Every measure of restitution only compounds the rift. The very attempt to fill those empty husks, to reanimate the corpse of language by infusing meaning from the outside, only confirms this emptiness: in lending voice to the voiceless, the allegorist forcibly ventriloquizes the object and thus confirms and compounds its muteness. Meaning can be registered only as alien and intrusive – a hectic and excessive vitality, induced by shock or in the manner of an injection. Sustained by an artificial and burdensome life support, language finds itself convulsed by its own arbitrariness as it comes to confront its own allegorical apparatus. This can make for peculiar theater.

This is how Benjamin describes the German mourning plays of the seventeenth century – “plays written by brutes for brutes,” in the words of a hostile (Baroque) contemporary (*OG*, 53) – with their disjointed dialogue, fragmentary or incoherent plotlines, thematic crudeness, cluttered stagecraft, and incessant rhetorical bombast. Another contemporary critic found the flamboyance of topics monotonous: the plays “deal only [sic] with the commands of kings, killing, despair, infanticide, patricide, conflagrations, incest, war and commotion, lamentation, weeping, sighing, and suchlike ...” (*OG*, 62).

Intent on drawing the theological-political contours of the German *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin doesn’t pause to explore its connection to other contemporary symbolic practices. He doesn’t ask the obvious question – that is, whether the clamor on the Baroque stage might at least in part be compensating for the thwarting of ceremonial opportunities elsewhere. If “mournfulness finds satisfaction” in the *Trauerspiel* (*OG*, 119) – if the early modern playhouse resounds, in the words of yet another contemporary, with “loud cries, sighing, much lamentation” (*OG*, 72) – this only underscores the fact that outside the theater the opportunities for mourning had sharply dwindled. In abolishing Purgatory, the Reformation had placed the dead at an unbridgeable distance from the living: intercessionary practices were abolished, funeral rites abbreviated, church bells silenced, post-mortem prayers truncated, corpses exhumed, and entire cemeteries relocated, usually for sanitation reasons, outside city walls. In restricting the scope of ritual mourning, the Reformation had effectively put the dead out of circulation.<sup>10</sup> This segregation may have also inadvertently pro-

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<sup>10</sup> There is an abundance of literature on this topic. For the German context, see Koslofsky 2000, Karant-Nunn 1997, and Karant-Nunn 2009. For the Elizabethan context, see Greenblatt 2001, Diehl 1997, and Döring 2006.

duced exactly the opposite effect: denied *ritual* access to the dead, deprived of formal protocols of communication, the living may have found their demands to be all the more unpredictable and intrusive.

Some historians have suggested that the theater may have provided a temporary refuge for a growing pile of cultic refuse. Stephen Greenblatt, for example, describes the forced migration of these remnants from the sacral space of the church into the disenchanting space of the theater, where they could continue to circulate in effigy – distorted, parodied, miniaturized, at once protected, profaned, and eventually abandoned. The duel scene in *Hamlet*, with its piecemeal recycling of the Catholic Mass (chalice, altar, etc.), is an obvious example.<sup>11</sup>

The bricolage could also take a startlingly literal form. When it was not being melted down or turned into cheese presses, the paraphernalia gutted from the churches often supplied theater companies with a seemingly unending flow of costumes, décor, and stage props – altars, chalices, candlesticks, priestly vestments.<sup>12</sup> The theater itself had become a quarry, a warehouse, a construction site, a laboratory, a museum, and ultimately a playground – a transitional zone in which the material vestiges of discarded rituals could be inventoried, plundered, scrutinized, admired, reviled, and eventually refunctionalized as *spolia*. Within the profane space of the theater the detritus of mourning could acquire a second life. Mourning itself had become a raggedy transitional object that could be played with, abused, and reluctantly relinquished. Early modern theater does not just simulate mourning or stimulate vicarious or cathartic forms of mourning. It raises mourning to the second power. By putting on stage the flotsam of a defunct ceremonial apparatus it enables the viewing public to part with traditional mortuary practices: it stages a kind of funeral for funerals. The spectator learns to lose or let go of the most entrenched signifiers and routines of loss itself.

*Hamlet* again is a perfect example. This may contribute to its puzzling place in Benjamin's account of the German *Trauerspiel*: he confusingly introduces the play as both a deviation from the genre and its most luminous example. In other words, *Hamlet* has the status of an exception: it both exceeds and

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<sup>11</sup> For a vigorous exploration of this recycling of Catholic liturgical remnants within Protestant theatrical culture, see Greenblatt 2000 and Greenblatt 2001.

<sup>12</sup> This has been well documented in Elizabethan theater history, a far more thoroughly trodden field than early modern German theater studies, and one likely to yield more spectacular results given the intensity of iconoclastic activity in England. For different approaches to the use of deconsecrated church artifacts as stage props in English theater, compare Greenblatt 1990 and Williamson 2009.

confirms, from a fragile but crucial historical and geographical distance, the basic parameters of the genre. Benjamin's remarks on *Hamlet* are unbearably elliptical and even more hermetic than usual, so I'm going to do some reconstruction and extrapolation. There is some textual warrant for what I'm about to say, though it requires a certain amount of exegetical maneuvering. I'm going to be pushing against the grain of Benjamin's *Hamlet* discussion, or at least what might at first glance seem to be its jarringly uplifting climax. Benjamin glimpses a surge of radiance in Hamlet's dying moments: with his last breath the prince cuts short his interminable lamentation, embraces providence, and as Christian sparks fly, attains "blissful existence" (OG, 158).

My own reading of the last scene in *Hamlet* is considerably bleaker, but it actually takes its cue from Benjamin's larger, and to my mind far more interesting, argument. What follows is inspired by two or three cryptic hints in the *Trauerspiel* book. I'll be extrapolating rather than paraphrasing. First: Benjamin discerns in Hamlet the features of the "weeping investigator" – he is referring to the ponderous figure of Melencolia (in Dürer's famous etching) as she sits slumped amid a clutter of abandoned tools and artifacts (OG, 157). *Hamlet has the making of a collector*.

Second: Hamlet's own virtuosity as a mourner – his wild display of incompatible moods and postures, his constant fluctuation, even within the space of a single scene, or speech, or sentence, from morose to manic, from taciturn to histrionic – is best understood not in terms of either temperamental inconsistency or psychological conflict and ambivalence, but rather as an expression of a *historical* antinomy arising from the epochal fault line – the rift or *Zwiespalt* (OG, 157) – that marks the irreversible transition to the modern age. *Hamlet's problem* (as Eliot called it) *is the problem of history itself*.

If *Hamlet* is paradigmatic of the German *Trauerspiel*, this is because it dramatizes the antinomies of secular modernity at the point of their most acute disturbance. It marks the spot where the reconfiguration of time and space starts to seep into the fabric of social existence. The disenchantment of death introduces a fissure – a "jagged line of demarcation" (OG, 166) – that will shake the foundations of political existence. *Hamlet's* shocking modernity lies in its attempt to rethink the logic of sovereignty by redefining the terms of cultural and political succession. It does this by exploring the cultural apparatus of mourning at a critical moment of irreversible breakdown. This requires, as a part of the play's own dress rehearsal, putting all the "shapes of grief" on show.

Not the least of the ironies of the play is that Hamlet's insistent fidelity to the dead is accompanied by a flagrant disregard for all available funerary practices. For all Hamlet's intransigence and tenacity as a mourner, he's also the

first to dispense with mortuary protocol: he unceremoniously shoves corpses into stairwells, cavorts in graveyards, dispatches people to their death without the dignity of last rites. But this disdain for convention is matched by Hamlet's own diligence as a purveyor of mortuary culture: he's scrutinizing and cataloguing the available options with the assiduousness of a scholar. Even as he renounces the superficiality of all existing "forms, moods, and shapes of grief" he keeps running through their historical variations as if he were staging a pageant or curating an exhibition. This partly accounts for the energy of his own antics: they're bursting with antiquarian rage. Hamlet is compiling a historical compendium of melancholy styles, sometimes in period costume, sometimes accessorized with props.

Hamlet knows all the Renaissance tropes by heart. Inky-cloaked, he exudes an elegant waft of mourning. "Entering reading," he displays the ruminative sadness of the scholar. Wild-eyed, hair on end, he displays the disheveled intensity of the madman. Sparkling with wit, he exhibits a poetic streak – a touch of melancholic genius worthy of a Ficino. He strikes a rancorous note too – a surge of corrosive distemper in keeping with the satirists. Accessorized with skull, he poses for a *vanitas* painting. He dips into the medieval repertoire. Paralyzed, slothful, he presents the distinct symptoms of acedia. He becomes a medical specimen, born under the wrong star, or unhinged by humoral imbalance. Various remedies are administered or self-administered – the consolations of philosophy, the distractions of theater, sea travel, good old fashioned exercise (dueling, for example), all of which prove ineffective if not counterproductive and inspire Hamlet to ever more vigorous investigations.

Pagan styles of grieving also make cameo appearances. Niobe weeps, Pyrrhus avenges, Hecuba wails. And Hamlet, watching, ponders another curious feature of mourning: as a performance it unfailingly provokes invidious comparisons: *I could drown the stage with my own tears ...* The skirmish with Laertes in the graveyard reveals yet another unpleasant feature: narcissism. Mourning unleashes a rivalrous energy that can lead to painfully farcical effect. Let's heap up Ophelia's burial mound – my grief has the colossal proportions of Mount Olympus. No, my sandcastle's bigger – I'd eat a crocodile, I'd drink vinegar, I'd ... Implicit in the struggle for supremacy is the acknowledgment that the pyre is ultimately built for me. Every memorial for the dead is a victory monument to the living. The competition is not just between the survivors, but essentially with the deceased; it's his own funeral that Hamlet is rehearsing in the graveyard.

Hamlet has the avidness of a collector: he quotes out of context, he scrutinizes, dissects, exfoliates, exhumes scraps of defunct funerary discourse as if he were disinterring a skeleton. As a collector, of course, Hamlet displays the

parsimony he despises in his mother. There may not be a wedding in the end, only four spectacularly botched funerals, and that's before the final slaughter, but there's much to plunder. Hamlet's own thrift converts the leftover funeral meats of the entire tradition into food for thought.

It's less that Hamlet's grief is inauthentic or opportunistic than that it's self-aware. His antics do not so much ironize or invalidate his grief as acknowledge its ineluctable constructedness and visibility as a social product. Hamlet is not just demonstrating the precarity of all mourning; he's providing its phenomenology in the strict Hegelian sense. The very contempt for convention attests to an impossible need for validation, and points to the fact that mourning is, like every other human act, a cultural artifact, a "shape," inflected by its own special historicity and burdened by its specific mode of transience. Even that which "passes show" cannot fail to make a show of passing. And this spectacle of renunciation will become the aporetic kernel of the patrimony to be passed on. Part of the enigma of *Hamlet*, the kernel of its weird theatricality, is that it manages to make theater out of the dissolution of theater: it stages a divestiture of the ceremonial apparatus of divestiture and inheritance circa 1600. In inventing a rite of passage for previous rites of passage, Hamlet is also rehearsing an event that he already knows to be impossible: he's getting ready to stage-manage his own funeral.

There's a lot of noise at the end of *Hamlet*. Hamlet's final speeches have neither the fluency nor grandiloquence of the soliloquies nor the verbal punch and sparkle of the preceding dialogue. With their repeated self-interruptions, random interjections, truncated scansion, and sudden switches of direction, his last lines have the driven, staccato pressure of a voice from beyond the grave.<sup>13</sup> There's a Hunter Gracchus-like quality to Hamlet's dying moments, connected to the fundamentally bad timing of his death: it arrives both a few decades too early and, like the modernity he embodies, about a century too late. His actual time of death, the moment of transition from life to death (as from speech to silence), is obscure and muddled, and seems to be constantly repeating, as if Hamlet has somehow missed the moment of dying and, having arrived too late for his own demise, he is condemned to keep reenacting it in slow motion.

The point is suggested when the already fatally wounded Hamlet grabs the cup from Horatio and re-administers the poison to himself, as if once were not enough, as if the corpse might still need killing. It's underscored by the fact that although they've all been given the same poison within minutes of each

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent discussion of rhetorical "abruption" at the end of *Hamlet*, see Neill 1997, 19–23.



other it somehow takes Hamlet considerably longer to die than Gertrude, Laertes, and Claudius combined.<sup>14</sup> And the point is finally driven home by the spectral refrain that keeps on punctuating Hamlet's final peroration with the repetitive insistence of the undead. "I am *dead*, Horatio" (V.ii.337). "Horatio, I am *dead*" (V.ii.343). "O, I *die*, Horatio" (V.ii.358). And finally (the order of these four statements is crucial for the point I'm about to make): "He [Fortinbras] has my *dying* voice" (V.ii.361). Note the chronological wrinkle: *I am dead, I am dead, I die, I am dying*. For a few seconds, time starts running backwards.

Only from such a post-mortem vantage can Hamlet, having just forsworn augury, deliver his final prophesy: "I do prophesy that th'election lights / On Fortinbras" (V.ii.360–361). More precisely: only from this posthumous position can Hamlet convert an act of prediction into an act of bequeathing. With his "dying voice," Hamlet nominates Fortinbras king. But by naming Fortinbras as his successor, Hamlet acts as if he were in a position to have one: he speaks from a place he is strictly unauthorized to occupy. During the distended interval between Laertes's rapier thrust and his own (for real) last breath, sixty lines later, Hamlet manages to turn back the clock. He momentarily reverses the transition from death to dying so as to assume the mantle of kingship. By outliving the "damned Dane," if only for a moment, Hamlet is able to stage the interregnum within his own lifetime: he occupies the empty seat of power, if only long enough to vacate it.<sup>15</sup>

But since all sovereign legitimacy has by now already been spectacularly dismantled, Hamlet's assumption of the empty throne is strictly presumptive, and his testamentary gesture is both ephemeral and spectral: he can conjure only the relics of outdated rituals, empty formulas pillaged from an obsolete tradition, and in any case his bequest will soon enough prove irrelevant. Hav-

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<sup>14</sup> It will take Hamlet an astonishing sixty lines to die, contrasted with the others' twenty, twenty-seven, and five, respectively. All line references to the play will be indicated in the text, using the Arden edition (Shakespeare 1982).

<sup>15</sup> My interpretation obviously pushes completely against the grain of Carl Schmitt's reading of the "dying voice" in Schmitt 2009. Something similar to the scenario I am sketching is staged in the film of Richard Burton's 1964 *Hamlet*, directed by John Gielgud, where the camera keeps circling back to the empty throne. Just after saying "Horatio, I am dead," Hamlet unceremoniously pushes Claudius's corpse from the chair, where he had earlier forced him to drink the poison, and a minute later, just after he utters his last words ("The rest is silence"), his corpse is lowered by Horatio into the vacant seat. The whole sequence of lines between "Horatio, I am dead" and "The rest is silence" – in other words, Hamlet's reverse transition from death to dying – takes place against the backdrop of this empty throne, and can be seen as a way of occupying (or more precisely, demarcating and highlighting) this emptiness. Hamlet himself can occupy the throne only for a few seconds, and only once he is already, for the fourth time, and definitively, dead.

ing just staged a military coup, Fortinbras will have no need of Hamlet's dying words to claim his inheritance, and this regime change will need no ratification through "election."<sup>16</sup> A "vantage" and "the rights of memory" – a strong arm and birthright – will suffice.

Hamlet's dying act is followed by a flurry of speeches that he himself can neither control nor scrutinize. His last words are conspicuously not the play's own; it's not even certain that they're words at all. The play drags on long after Hamlet himself has officially dropped the curtain, declaring that the rest is silence. It isn't. A noisy spatter of maimed rites immediately breaks that silence. Horatio launches into the blandest of orations – a snippet of traditional (Catholic) requiem, followed shortly by a promissory catalogue of Really Big Events that might pass for a plot summary of the preceding drama were it not so generic that it bears little connection to what we've just been viewing. The sketchiness of his synopsis only underscores the fact that Horatio himself has in any case missed all the good parts – the on-stage soliloquies, the off-stage adventures – he's a shoddy scholar, a theater critic who's just arrived on time for the last act. Disregarding the dying Hamlet's (Ghost-like) injunction to *remember* him, to tell his story, to mend his "wounded name," Horatio chooses to rattle off a list of randomly generated hyperboles that in their abstractness strain the limits of narrative and cast doubt on the power of both testimony and testament in a disenchanting world. Where death has lost its authority the art of storytelling shrivels.<sup>17</sup>

Fortinbras disrupts the quiet with the blare of a military funeral, delivering a perfunctory eulogy phrased in the vengeful grammar of the past conditional:

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<sup>16</sup> Insofar as Hamlet's "dying voice" does manage to exert testamentary force, it does so only by means of a performative chiasmus. Strictly speaking, Hamlet's testamentary privilege, such as it is, could be granted only posthumously by Fortinbras himself. It is only in being laid out royally, as a corpse, that Hamlet could acquire the sovereign authority to bequeath kingship to Fortinbras, whose own authority to order Hamlet's funeral presupposes the funeral he's about to organize. (In fact, Fortinbras is only more or less following Horatio's orders in stage-managing Hamlet's funeral [V.ii.383].) The performative relay of sovereignty is thus infinitely circular, as the final repeated "O" will graphically suggest. Each testator receives his testamentary power retroactively as the bequest of his own legatee, each player is heir to his own successor. I should add here that, just as my reading works against Schmitt's explicitly authoritarian reading of the dying voice, it works equally against the liberal reading offered by Julia Lupton in her very suggestive discussion of the ambiguities of "election," and the possible shifting, in *Hamlet*, from a "vertical" (sovereignty, paternity, divinity) to a "horizontal" (friendship, fraternity, collegiality) model of political association. See "The Hamlet Elections" in Lupton 2011.

<sup>17</sup> *Ipse dixit*. "The storyteller borrows his authority from death." See "The Storyteller," *SW3*, 151.

he pays homage to the soldier that Hamlet *would have* been, the king he *could* have been. The counterfactual language only underscores Hamlet's actual exclusion from the symbolic order of Elsinore and seals this exclusion by giving it the status of an exception: Hamlet's failure to inhabit the political regime only confirms the force of this regime even as it is in the throes of dismantling itself before his and our eyes.

Even Hamlet breaks his own silence. In the Folio edition, Hamlet's last word ("silence") is conspicuously followed by a long, drawn out sound. He opens his mouth and utters a prolonged, inarticulate moan. "O, o, o, o." Or perhaps it is a sigh. Or it might be a groan, a roar, a rasp, a gurgle, a gasp, a growl, a howl, or a whimper – everything is open to the actor's interpretation. As if confessing to his own mortality, the playwright himself forcibly relinquishes control at this point, releasing his script to the vagaries of performance.<sup>18</sup> The sound leaks past the end of Hamlet's dying speech and prolongs his posthumous condition for one infinitesimally protracted moment – vocal detritus accumulating beyond the grave, like maggots in the sun, or like the hair or fingernails said to keep on growing on a dead man's corpse.<sup>19</sup> Just before everyone else comes along to ruin the silence, Hamlet claims that silence by stamping it with the imprint of his own voice – a kind of acoustic death mask administered by the corpse itself.<sup>20</sup> He preemptively breaks the silence

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**18** It is possible that the script itself might actually be a product of its own performance. Some scholars have argued that the changes in the Folio version reflect specific innovations improvised by the actors in the course of putting on the play: the text would be in this sense more the transcription of a previously unscripted performance (for example, a particularly bombastic delivery by Burbage) than a stage direction. See Jenkins 1960 and Brown 1992a, 28. For some of the controversies regarding the status of the "o, o, o, o" ending, and the Folio text more generally, see the responses to Brown by Mehl 1992, Charney 1992, and Klein 1993, as well as Brown's response in Brown 1992b. See also Hibbard's discussion of the status of the Folio edition in his introduction to Shakespeare 1987, 104–130.

**19** Cf. Benjamin's description of the sprouting cadaver, *OG*, 218.

**20** I am inspired here by Lee Edelman's suggestive comments on Hamlet's last sentence. "'The rest is silence,' he declares in the end, imprinting himself on that silence, effectively making it *his* silence, which now serves as his remains. The rest of the world, what rests in the world, is now what rests of him" (Edelman 2011, 151). Edelman is perfectly correct as far as he goes. Hamlet's final sentence can be read a kind of seal or signature. In commanding the silence (the "is" here functioning as an optative), Hamlet is attempting to capture his own aftermath in words – to secure the unspeakable remnant by making it his own. But if we pursue this line of thought beyond the end of the sentence, to include the syllables that follow in the Folio version, Hamlet's final signature starts to look less like an act of sovereign assertion (one more attempt to take possession of the royal signet ring, which was a counterfeit anyway) and more like a kind of death mask – the repetitive imprint of the empty cipher of sovereignty reduced to sheer performative insistence: a "thing of nothing."

by delivering his own inarticulate epitaph before the others get there.<sup>21</sup> He turns himself, for the last time, into his own progenitor, survivor, and chief mourner. And he converts muteness into a strange kind of eloquence.

Hamlet wrests poetry out of the dregs of language; he manages to turn a final pun at zero hour. It takes enormous thrift to get so much out of a single, stupid letter: is it a vocative, an apostrophe, a syntactic or paratactic interjection; is it even a letter at all, or is it rather a number, a zero, a null sign, the sign of nothing; or is it a sign of nothing at all, not even a sign, just the barest indication of an empty sound, a meaningless breath, sustained for an indeterminate interval, inanely repeated – an address to no one, an apostrophe of nothing, lament forged at the point of lament's own evacuation? This would mark the last act of the pageant and a cue for mourning's own "final exit" (cf. *OG*, 235). With his last gasp Hamlet stages the last remnant of a ceremony stripped of all spiritual and cultural density, ritual reduced to empty, formal repetition, performativity at the limits of theatricality, the rotary pressure of the drive, the force of "insistent communicativeness" – sheer expiration without a hint of inspiration.

In the Folio version, the sound is represented graphically as a series of four repeated "O's," separated by commas, and followed by a final period. As a stage direction, the punctuation marks a series of breaks in the continuous flow of breath. It suggests a repeated stalling and restarting of the vocal engine, corresponding to the metaphysical stutter of Hamlet's repeated act of dying. *I am dead, Horatio; Horatio, I am dead; O I die, Horatio; I am dying ...*

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- OG* Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 1925, pub. 1928; trans. 1977. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.

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<sup>21</sup> That includes us. We haven't yet considered the meta-dramatic impact of the noisy audience, these "mutes or audiences to this act" (V.ii.340) – that is, we ourselves, as we applaud, chatter, and shuffle our way out of the theater, and begin to negotiate the fragile interregnum between theater and the ordinary world.

- Language* Walter Benjamin. "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." *SW* 62–74. Trans. by Edmond Jephcott of "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen." 1916. In *GS* 2. 140–157.
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# The Tradition in Ruins: Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem on Language and Lament

Gershom Scholem's<sup>1</sup> youthful diaries might convey the impression that Scholem, throughout his early twenties, was in thrall to Walter Benjamin, and that much of what is novel in his earliest work consisted of a "creative translation" of Benjamin's ideas into his own language.<sup>2</sup> Scholem propagates this impression himself when he describes his 1917–1918 essay "On Lament and Lamentation" as the "true continuation" of Walter Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (*LY*, 201). But Scholem's essay "On Lament" – while working within the framework of Benjamin's early philosophy of language – subjects it to a revolution. Whereas Benjamin's essay "On Language" portrays language as a continuum that unfolds between the mute language of creation and its revelation in the name, Scholem describes an unbridgeable abyss separating the expressionless from its expression.<sup>3</sup> He marks this abyss by introducing a distinction between an inner core of language – which he identifies with an introverted symbolism – and its exteriorization in expression. Expression requires extraversion, hence the destruction of symbolic interiority, which means that only a ruin of the symbol is communicable. Scholem describes this extraversion as the "revolution of silence" (*Lament*, 313).

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1 This chapter extends the argument that I make in Schwebel 2014. Rodolphe Gasché graciously invited me to present a version of this essay at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the resulting work benefited from his questions and comments, as well as those of Sergey Dolgopolski. I am grateful to have been able to discuss my interpretation of Scholem and Benjamin with Vivian Liska, Ilit Ferber, and Lina Barouch. Eduard Iricinschi read a draft of this chapter and made helpful suggestions.

2 In one characteristic diary entry, Scholem describes how he "creatively" grasped an early essay of Benjamin's ("Life of Students") by "translating" it into his own language. On this process of creative translation, Scholem muses: "How many times have I done this by now?" (*LY*, 116; for complete citations of works given in abbreviations, see the bibliography at the end of this essay).

3 Benjamin also invokes the "expressionless" [*das Ausdruckslose*], most prominently in "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (1919–1922). But in earlier texts, which Benjamin shared with Scholem, he refers to the cognate concepts of the "unsayable" and the "non-communicable." Notably, in a 1916 letter to Martin Buber, Benjamin writes that "it repeatedly seems to me that the crystal-pure elimination of the unsayable [*Unsaybaren*] in language is the most obvious form given to us to be effective within language and, to that extent, through it" (*CWB*, 80).



Scholem's "creative translation" both transfigures Benjamin's philosophy of language and anticipates his later work on the Kabbalah, as I will argue. "On Lament" introduces a movement of contraction and expression into language, which bears a structural similarity to the dialectic of divine withdrawal and emanation [*tsimtsum*] that Scholem details in his work on the Lurianic Kabbalah. For the Lurianic school, revelation and creation (both acts of divine exteriorization) are preceded by a contraction inward, which Scholem interprets as God's exile into himself (Scholem 1946, 261). This exilic prehistory ensures that revelation and creation are not continuous emanations of God, but require a prior reversal of direction, a revolution from interiority into exteriority, which establishes a breach between the Godhead and creation.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in "On Lament," Scholem has language emerge from deep isolation, or withdrawn silence, which he identifies with the symbolism of mourning. Because this symbolism cannot be uttered without passing through its own annihilation, the expression of lament cannot be the continuous unfolding of the being expressed in it. The way into language emerges out of the fall from original expressionlessness.

Only as a ruin is the esoteric symbolism of mourning rendered transmissible [*tradierbar*]. What is novel in "On Lament" – and is an idea that continues to animate Scholem's mature work – is the link between the destruction of the inexpressible and its inscription in a transmissible tradition.<sup>5</sup> In addition to tracing how Scholem transforms Benjamin's early philosophy of language by introducing the primordial *destruction* of the inexpressible in the transition from symbolic into communicable language, I will explore Scholem's idea of the transmissible ruin in its linguistic and historical facets.

## 1 Lament and the medium of language in Benjamin

Scholem's essay "On Lament" beckons to be deciphered in terms of Benjamin's early philosophy of language. Not only is Scholem's vocabulary drawn from

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<sup>4</sup> Nathan Rotenstreich argues that the "hiatus" between the inexpressible and its expression (which is a characteristic feature of Scholem's interpretation of the Kabbalah) ensures that language cannot become a "bridge or device blurring the distance between man and God" (Rotenstreich 1978, 608). In this way, as Rotenstreich points out (608–609), Scholem distinguishes Kabbalistic mysticism from the doctrine of emanation.

<sup>5</sup> Scholem's "Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah" (1978) provides an example of the link between destruction and transmissibility in Scholem's later work, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

“On Language as Such,”<sup>6</sup> but “On Lament” is in fact the “continuation” of Benjamin’s essay, since Scholem picks up where Benjamin leaves off: at the end of “On Language as Such,” Benjamin mentions the symbolic side of language, about which “at least explicitly, no reference has here been made.” Offering only minimal elaboration, Benjamin adds: “For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the non-communicable [*Nicht-Mittelbaren*]” (*Language*, 74). Scholem must have taken Benjamin’s remark as a clue, for he turns Benjamin’s essay on language inside out to bring to light what it does not say (at least not explicitly) about the non-communicable.

With the exception of his terse allusion to the non-communicable, Benjamin addresses language as the “communication of the communicable.”<sup>7</sup> The seemingly tautological structure of this idea – that language is the communication of what is itself communicable – is crucial to Benjamin’s argument in “On Language as Such.” For language is not the communication of something *extrinsic* to language by means of conventional signs, as the “bourgeois” view maintains (*Language*, 65). Rather, Benjamin understands language as having *intrinsic* being and dignity.<sup>8</sup> He likens language to a secret key that opens up the concealed nature of things, closed to us by virtue of their taciturn materiality. The revelation of things in language involves the disclosure of their own self-expression. The self-expression of things – their *language* – is what is communicated in language. Therefore human language is not the entirety of language as such, but it has the special designation of being the only *spoken* language. Benjamin characterizes human language as the “language of language” – language elevated to the second degree – since in human language, the *mute* language of things is *voiced* (*Language*, 65).

The task of philosophy, as Benjamin understands it, is to redeem the self-expression of things – to name them, and thereby give voice to the voiceless.<sup>9</sup>

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6 The most obvious example of Benjamin’s terminology in Scholem’s essay is the term “mental being” [*geistiges Wesen*], which Scholem appropriates when he characterizes mourning as the “mental being” that corresponds to the language of lament. But there are other, less obvious echoes of Benjamin’s language in Scholem’s essay, which I will discuss in the course of this chapter.

7 There is already a significant body of scholarship on Benjamin’s essay “On Language as Such,” but my purpose in interpreting it here is to trace how Scholem takes up and transforms aspects of Benjamin’s essay. For an insightful treatment of the “mediality” of language in Benjamin, see Samuel Weber’s “Impart-ability” in Weber 2008, 31–52. For an astute argument that “communicability” is the difference that language makes, in that it is that part of creation that yearns to be heard and redeemed, see Gasché 1988.

8 Benjamin refers to language’s intrinsic dignity in a 1916 letter to Martin Buber (CWB, 80).

9 Benjamin makes this argument about the philosopher’s task, not only in the essay “On Language as Such,” but also in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to his 1925 *Habilitation* thesis,

This task is not restricted to philosophy of language, for Benjamin conceives of experience and knowledge as taking place in a linguistic medium.<sup>10</sup> If things have their own way of expressing themselves, then *knowledge* of things involves an act of *translation* – not from one verbal language into another, but from the wordless language of things into the conceptual medium of philosophy (*Language*, 69).

The task of naming things bespeaks a yearning to overcome the non-identity between the *wordlessness* of things and the linguistic being of humans, which is *essentially communicable*. But things are *not* communicable in their entire being; they remain, to a degree, recalcitrant to translation, nameless and unknowable. “On Language as Such” reflects this situation. On the one hand, the philosophical task is to redeem things by naming them. On the other hand, only that *part* of things that is itself communicable can be so redeemed. The remainder that is non-communicable punctures the illusion of a “happy match” between human language and the nature of things.<sup>11</sup> Every communication of the communicable is therefore accompanied by a lament for what is non-communicable in things, for what remains unredeemed and unnamed. Benjamin refers to this as nature’s lament, speculating that if nature could speak, it would raise a lament for language itself (*Language*, 72).

Like any philosophical task, Benjamin’s rests on epistemological presuppositions. The central theoretical concept at work in “On Language as Such” is that of the “medium” of language:

Whatever is communicable *of* a mental entity, *in* this it communicates itself. Which signifies that all language communicates itself. Or, more precisely, that all language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense the ‘medium’ [*das ‘Medium’*] of the communication. (*Language*, 64)

This account of the “medium” suggests that language is a movement that unfolds within a self-enclosed circuit, since only what is communicable – i.e., language *itself* – is communicated in language. But if language expresses language itself, this is not the simple expression of an identity. At the outset of

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*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [OG], and in a letter that Benjamin wrote to Florens Christian Rang in 1923, which contains the following summation: “The philosopher’s task is to name the idea, as Adam named nature” (SW1, 389).

**10** For the idea of knowledge and experience as unfolding within a linguistic medium, see two early, related texts of Benjamin’s, “On Perception” (SW1, 93–96) and “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (SW1, 100–110).

**11** I am paraphrasing Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944/1969], 3, in my description of adequacy as the “happy match” between concept and object.

“On Language as Such,” Benjamin introduces the primordial [*Ursprünglich*] distinction between the essence, or “mental being” [*geistiges Wesen*] that is communicated in language and the “linguistic being” [*sprachliches Wesen*] in which it is communicated (*Language*, 63). Language communicates a mental being only *insofar* as it is linguistic in its own structure (*Language*, 63). Benjamin’s “insofar” suggests that there are degrees of *non-identity* between a mental being and its linguistic expression, or that not all of a mental being is capable of communication.

Intriguingly, Benjamin describes a lack of “outward identity” [*von außen gleich*] between the mental being and the linguistic being of things (*Language*, 63). It is noteworthy that he reserves the term “inwardly identical” [*im innersten ... identisch*] to describe the immediately creative word of God (*Language*, 68). I interpret the distinction between inward and outward identity to suggest that identity in the medium of language admits of degrees. While Benjamin regards all communication in language as unmediated [*unmittelbar*] – a lack of mediation premised on language’s self-expressive nature – he nonetheless acknowledges different degrees of immediacy in language. Only God’s creative word is immediately creative: in it is founded the absolute identity between the word (“Let there be”) and being. All other languages – reflecting their origin in the creative word of God – partake in the immediacy of the divine word to a degree, but are not themselves identical to the word. God’s word can thus be described as the innermost center in the medium of language, to which all other languages are gradually (medially) related. Insofar as the mental being of things is not immediately identical to the word, things are not completely communicable.

Benjamin characterizes the medium of language as a graduated continuum, made up of expressions that differ by degree of density [*Dichte*] (*Language*, 66). In his conception, in the translation from one language into another the whole of language unfolds from the dense, material expression of things to the rarified, spiritual medium of sound (*Language*, 70). In successive translations, the mute language of things is gradually revealed – both in the sense that things are *opened up* from mute concealment into audible expression, and also in the sense that names elevate the language of things to *revelation*. Revelation is a gradual process involving translation, for things do not communicate themselves directly to God, but rather to man, who names them; in naming things, man communicates his own mental being to God. Benjamin remarks that revelation, “the highest mental being, as it appears in religion, rests solely on man and on the language in him” (*Language*, 67). Names are the revelation of language, since in names, language itself is brought to speech. The naming language is thus the only language that does not involve the inexpressible [*das Unaussprechliche*] (*Language*, 67).

“Language itself is not perfectly expressed in things themselves,” writes Benjamin (*Language*, 67). Nevertheless, things have a degree of communicability, and this reflects their “community” with the word of God – a community that is “material,” since things lack the “spiritual” medium of sound (*Language*, 67). Benjamin gives two different images for the communion of things with the word of God. On the one hand, he refers to the “germ” [*Keim*] of God’s word in created things (*Language*, 69). On the other hand, (referencing a poem by Friedrich Max Müller), he alludes to the signature that God gave all created beasts, so that they could step forward and receive their names from man (*Language*, 70).<sup>12</sup> These images are at the basis of Benjamin’s account of translation: first, he envisions translation as involving the receptivity of names to the seed of the divine word in things, which allows names to *give birth* to language in things (*Language*, 69–70).<sup>13</sup> Second, Benjamin conceives of translation as a purely sensuous correspondence between the signatures in things and their audible expression in names. Music is exemplary of this purely sensuous correspondence, since in music, the written notes are expressed in a sequence of sounds, without any mediation of conceptual significance.<sup>14</sup>

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**12** These images did not originate with Benjamin. The idea of the “germ” of language may reflect the Stoic tradition of the *logos spermatikos*, whereas the idea of a divine “signature” in created things is found in Paracelsus and Jacob Böhme. According to Paracelsus, the inner, animating spirit of things could be read from the traces visible in their external texture: “It is the exterior thing alone that gives knowledge of the interior; otherwise no inner thing could be known” (*Paragranum* [1529–1530], 97, as cited in Bono 1995, 134). Böhme took up Paracelsus’s notion of divine signatures and synthesized it with an interpretation of Genesis, arguing that the silent language of nature, evident in its material texture, or signature, was translated into the medium of sound in Adam’s names. Olga Pombo (1987, 44–46) describes the naming language of Adam as a transposition of the *Natursprache* to a higher power: “Hence, the Adamic language constitutes a second level, a human transposition (into the domain of the audible) of the Language of Nature, seen as an immediate and mute signification of the real.”

**13** Scholem picks up on this image in two ways in his essay “On Lament”: first, he distinguishes between the origin of language and its birth in revelation (*Lament*, 314). The birth of language occurs when the seed of the divine word in things fertilizes the names in which language speaks. In the birth of language, language itself is revealed or expressed. However, the origin of language is God’s word itself, which, we may conjecture from Scholem’s essay, is inexpressible. Second, evincing the idea of the seed of language, Scholem argues that whereas other languages have this kernel, or seed [*Kern*], lament has none (*Lament*, 313). The expression of lament is therefore not the birth of language, but its death.

**14** In a fragment entitled “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” (1916), Benjamin discusses how the mute language of nature, which yearns to express itself, finds itself blocked and betrayed by signifying language, but finds its resolution in music (*SW1*, 60). This idea of a *musical* reconciliation of sign and sound, bypassing the significance of words, is elaborated in the section on allegory in Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*OG*, 189–215). In a February 1918 diary entry reflecting on Benjamin’s work, Scholem describes the musical

As these images suggest, translation involves a process of fulfillment, in which the incomplete language in things – a “signature” that is unvoiced – is completed when it is voiced in the name. But this process of fulfillment is not the addition of something extrinsic to the language of things; it involves the *intensification* of their language, as the image of the “germ” suggests: names actualize and unfold the germinal potential for language in things. In other words, the language of things is raised to a *higher power* in names, which Benjamin suggests when he writes that names are “the language of language (if the genitive refers to the relationship not of a means but of a medium)” (*Language*, 65). The potentiation of the language of things in names is possible because all languages partake in the medium of divine language. Furthermore, because names potentiate the germ of divine language in things, Adam’s names are *objective*, rather than subjective and arbitrary: “The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed by God. For God created things; the creative word in them is the germ of the cognizing name” (*Language*, 70).

Benjamin’s conception of translation as a process of fulfillment and intensification corresponds to his analysis of chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis, which is the proof-text for this theory of language. In Benjamin’s parsing of the Genesis narrative, God’s language encompasses creation and knowledge, word and name. God creates things in the word and he recognizes his creations as good – an acknowledgement whereby the process of creation is completed (*Language*, 68). In the creation of man, however, God “sets language free,” entrusting man with the task of recognizing all created things in their names, and so completing creation (*Language*, 68). Man’s freedom in naming thus corresponds to the incompleteness of language in creation, which – precisely because it is incomplete – can be fulfilled in the names that man assigns to nature.

Benjamin is ambivalent regarding the task of giving voice to mute things by naming them, and his ambivalence arises from the incommensurability between the wordlessness of things and the essentially communicable language of man. On the one hand, naming is an act of fulfillment, which elevates the mute and *imperfect* language of creation into a more *perfect* language by giving it voice. On the other hand, Benjamin remarks that the translation of the mute expression of things into a language of names “cannot but add something,” and what is added is knowledge (*Language*, 70). Knowledge has a twofold character in Benjamin’s essay: God’s recognition of his creation as good represents a different kind of knowledge than what is seductively promised by the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This second kind of knowledge – knowledge of

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quality of human lament, and he compares this to the visual character of lament in nature, giving the example of the mournful expression of dogs (*LY*, 209).

good and evil – involves an abstract judgment, which is *extrinsic* to the being of things that are judged, rather than an intensification and fulfillment of the germinal word *in* them. The fall of language is anticipated in this second meaning of knowledge (*Language*, 71). Yet, even prior to the fall of language, Benjamin's ambivalence toward knowledge is intimated in the description of knowledge as "adding something." Names are both "intensive" *self*-expressions and "extensive" designations of other things, which Benjamin confirms when he characterizes the name as that *through* which and *in* which language itself is communicated (*Language*, 65).

Perhaps man's linguistic freedom already betokens despair, since the incompleteness of language in creation means that naming is not an unequivocal correspondence between things themselves and their names, but involves *deciphering* a residue of the divine word in things: a melancholy pursuit, since things themselves are mute and nameless (*Language*, 69). If Benjamin distinguishes between the "blissful" spirit of language in paradise and language after the fall, it is not the *event* of the fall that is decisive for the *mournfulness* implicit in naming; this arises from the distance between languages, and their different degrees of communicability. Even in paradise, the infinite distance between the namelessness of things and human names provokes nature's lament: "To be named – even when the namer is godlike and blissful – perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning" (*Language*, 73).

## 2 The Romantic medium and "knowledge mysticism"

"On Language as Such" involves not only a theory of language, but also a theory of knowledge. Benjamin's portrayal of knowledge is ambivalent, to be sure. Insofar as knowledge is not pure expression but introduces an element of judgment it is affiliated with evil: "The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is the only evil known in the paradisiacal state" (*Language*, 71). However, there is another idea of knowledge, which involves no judgment of an object, but fulfills the germ of the divine word in things. Thus, Benjamin speaks of God's word as the "pure medium of knowledge" (*Language*, 68). The "objectivity" of knowledge in the medium suggests that this knowledge is not imposed on things from without, but *recognizes* what is implicitly knowable (the germ of the divine word) in things, and fulfills it in the name.

This decidedly "non-bourgeois" conception of knowledge is a pendant to Benjamin's philosophy of language. Indeed, several of Benjamin's early texts

are devoted to discovering a theory of knowledge that would eradicate the “infertile” metaphysics (SW1, 103) of a “subject” that cognizes an “object.” But the fullest account of knowledge as unfolding itself in a “medium” is found in Benjamin’s 1919 doctoral dissertation, “On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism.”<sup>15</sup> Not only does the idea of “mediality” come through more clearly in Benjamin’s dissertation, casting light back onto his earlier essay on language, but a new idea emerges in Benjamin’s treatment of the Jena Romantics (Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis), which is crucial to my reading of Scholem’s argument in “On Lament.”<sup>16</sup> That is the idea of knowledge as a *ruin* or fragment of the absolute, which, in itself, is not *wholly* comprehensible.

Benjamin’s dissertation begins by distilling the theory of knowledge on which the early Romantic concept of art criticism rests. The “medium” of reflection is the key epistemological presupposition that Benjamin attributes to the early Romantics, since Romantic art criticism, he finds, is nothing other than *knowledge* of art in the medium of reflection (CC, 149). Like the medium of language – in which language is said to communicate itself *in* itself, or in the movement of its own unfolding – the medium of reflection entails a movement of reflection within itself.

The “basic fact” from which the early Romantic theory of knowledge proceeds is the relationship that thinking has to itself in reflection (CC, 120). Benjamin highlights two characteristics of “thinking thinking itself”: first, it involves an *immediate* relation, and second, it is *infinite*, since thinking thinking *itself* is not limited by the representation of an *object*. The immediacy of reflection is not intuitive, but stems from the connection between two forms: a connection generated by reflection itself. Reflection, in the first place, is reflection on the *form* of an object. This initial reflection on a form is immediately *transformed* when it becomes the object of a subsequent reflection. Through a spontaneous (and in this sense, immediate) reflective act, thinking produces the form of the form, elevating the first form to a higher power.

Related to the immediacy of reflection is its infinity, which Benjamin distinguishes from an endless regress, since it is a mode of *fulfillment*. The completed

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15 There are good reasons to be cautious about relating these two concepts of the “medium,” especially since Benjamin’s dissertation has been read as an immanent critique of the Jena Romantics, rather than an unqualified embrace of their ideas (Gasché 1992). But for the purpose of shedding light on the structure of “mediality,” I find the comparison between these two texts instructive.

16 Benjamin’s dissertation cannot be considered a source, in the strict sense, for Scholem’s work on lament, since it was not published until two years after Scholem wrote “On Lament.” But it is evident from their correspondence that Benjamin discussed his work in progress with Scholem. See especially Benjamin’s letter to Scholem from June 1917 (CWB, 87–89).



infinity envisioned here is an infinity of connectedness – an “intimate, most thoroughgoing connection” between each form of reflection and all other forms, generated in the stages of reflection (CC, 126). The infinity of reflection is not an infinite advance, but is a qualitative, gradual unfolding, from an obscure “being thought” to a “thinking being,” which conceives itself absolutely. Just as an adequate idea contains the same content as an obscure one, but these two ideas are distinguished in the degree of clarity with which this content is conceived, so do the early Romantics think of reflection as advancing, by degree of clarity, from a simple original reflection, which contains all of reality obscurely and implicitly in itself, to absolute reflection, in which this reality is raised to the highest degree of clarity, grasping the entire context of reflection immediately (CC, 129–130). As a medium of reflection, Friedrich Schlegel thus conceived of the whole of the real, “unfolding in its full content, with increasing distinctness up to the highest clarity in the absolute, in stages of reflection” (CC, 130). The medium is just this “constantly uniform connection” of forms:

In itself, this absolute would most correctly be designated the “medium of reflection.” [...] Reflection constitutes the absolute, and it constitutes it as a medium [...] the constantly uniform connection in the absolute, or in the system, both of which we have to interpret as the connectedness of the real [...] in the degrees of its clear unfolding. (CC, 132–133)

Just as the medium of language has at its center the *absolutely immediate* word of God, to which all other languages are only *medially* related, Benjamin describes the medium of reflection as having its center, or middle-point [*Mittelpunkt*], in the absolute self (CC, 122, 134). This absolute (to which Friedrich Schlegel assigned various metaphysical qualities, from the absolute “I” to the absolute idea of art) would grasp the entire context of reflection with *complete immediacy*. Such immediacy is never *actually* attained in any of the stages of reflection, but it is constituted as a “virtuality” – in principle, that is – in the medial stages of unfolding: “To be sure, as a virtuality, even an absolute immediacy in the grasping of the context of reflection is thinkable; with this the context would grasp itself in absolute reflection” (CC, 126). In the constant function, or inner law, whereby each form of reflection can be elevated to a higher form, the Romantics attained not the absolute itself, but a *formula* for its clear unfolding.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin cites the following fragment from Novalis: “To find formulas for art-individuals – formulas through which they can first be understood in the most authentic sense – is the business of an artistic critic, whose labors prepare the way for this history of art” (Novalis, *Schriften*, 13, quoted in CC, 155).

*Knowledge* in the medium of reflection is not knowledge of an object, but involves the gradual potentiation of an entity's form, through repeated reflections – a procedure that establishes the thoroughgoing connection between a form and all other forms in the medium. This understanding of knowledge is essential to Benjamin's presentation of the Romantic concept of art criticism, which does not regard the work of art as an "object," to be judged from without by "subjective" criteria. Rather, the work itself is gradually *fulfilled* in the medium of reflection – a process that is catalyzed by criticism. By reflecting on the form in a work, the critic elevates the work to a higher form. The method of intensifying reflection in a work can be repeated infinitely, until the work itself is *infinitized*, and the idea of art (i.e., the absolute in the medium of art) is *immediately* brought forth.

What is *criticizable* in a work of art is its form, which the Romantics considered to be a self-limitation, or enfolding of reflection. The reflection enfolded in a work could subsequently be driven out of itself, connected to all other forms in the medium, when subjected to infinitely intensifying reflections (CC, 155–156). Using the term familiar to us from his essay "On Language as Such," Benjamin refers to what is criticizable in the work as the "germ" [*Keim*] of reflection in it (CC, 159). Because criticism unfolds an idea that has its germ in the work, it is both *immanent* and *objective*.

Insofar as criticism is nothing other than the *fulfillment* of the germ of reflection in a work, it is completely positive, and thus "radically distinguished from the modern concept, which sees criticism as a negative court of judgment" (CC, 152). But Benjamin draws out criticism's destructive side, in that only the nascent reflection in a work is potentiated: "Criticism of a work is ... its reflection, which can only, as is self-evident, unfold the germ [*Keim*] of the reflection that is immanent to the work" (CC, 159). Because reflection fixes on only that which is itself reflection, and can be connected to all other forms of reflection in the medium, it *dissolves* whatever is singular and determinate in the work itself: "Criticism sacrifices the work totally for the sake of the single sphere of connection" (CC, 164). It is thus a question of "the assimilation of the limited work to the absolute, of its complete objectivization at the price of its ruin" (CC, 164). The "sacrifice" or "ruin" of what is singular for the sake of its connectability in the medium may have been implicit in Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such," since communication in the medium of language distills only what is communicable – i.e., *translatable* – in things, passing over the non-communicable in annihilating silence. But this destructive face first shows itself explicitly in Benjamin's doctoral dissertation.

However, this is clearly not just destructive, for the destruction of what is singular in a work is done for the sake of the *idea* – the absolute in the medium

of art. If this idea is presented in each work in a contingent, finite way, criticism seizes on that which is *universalizable* in the work (i.e., its form), and raises this to absolute clarity by way of repeated reflections (CC, 153). Benjamin distinguishes between the finite “presentational form” of the work, and the “absolute form,” or idea, which is revealed in the destruction of the work. Destruction of the work’s finite, singular form thus aims at its *survival* as an idea (CC, 164).

Insight into the “absolute form” involves no mystical intuition or ecstatic state, but consists of the *methodical* connection of forms in the medium. The idea of art is nothing other than the constant connection between forms – the law of form in its movement, or transmissibility. This is made clear in the following fragment from Novalis: “An idea cannot be grasped in a proposition. An idea is an infinite series of propositions, an irrational magnitude, incapable of being posited, incommensurable [...] Yet the law of its progression can be laid down” (Novalis, *Schriften*, 159, quoted in CC, 168). Benjamin tellingly characterizes the Romantic absolute as a “mystery of order” (CC, 165).<sup>18</sup> Because of its purely formal character, the Romantic method involves a “radical, mystical formalism” (CC, 123) or “knowledge mysticism” [*Erkenntnismystik*] (CC, 119).

The methodical, formal character of this mysticism had a profound impact on Scholem, as his diaries evince. Scholem’s earliest diary entries reflect a substantial debt to Martin Buber and his notion of mystical *experience* [*Erlebnismystik*] – an experience of the Absolute that can only be felt in *ineffable* wonder. Benjamin was sharply critical of this idea of mystical experience, and Scholem was persuaded by his criticisms.<sup>19</sup> A predilection for the methodical, for “knowledge” [*Erkenntnis*] as opposed to “experience” [*Erlebnis*], enters Scholem’s lexicon following his meeting with Benjamin in 1915.<sup>20</sup> As Scholem records in his diary, this new orientation toward knowledge was the result of Benjamin’s “spiritual influence” on him: “I’ve been in personal contact with Benjamin for three months now. It’s undeniable that his acquaintance has influenced me spiritually and will continue to do so in the sense of attuning me more to knowledge” (LY, 74). Here, Scholem is referring to the knowledge mysticism that he discerned in Benjamin’s early work. In another diary entry

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<sup>18</sup> “Order” is a watchword in Scholem’s diary. For instance, as he writes on 25 September 1917: “Religion is the consciousness of the Order of Things [...] Every movement unique to the individual is magical. This movement articulates a particular relationship to the Orders” (LY, 181).

<sup>19</sup> Scholem describes Benjamin’s sharp criticism of Buber in *WSF*, 37–38.

<sup>20</sup> Scholem’s diary abounds with references to the significance of knowledge, and the contrast between *Erkenntnis* and *Erlebnis*. See *Tb1*, 199, 209, 213, 507–508.

that captures Benjamin's idea of mediality as an immediate relationship, Scholem writes: "I don't know *what* knowledge is, but we *can* know some things (Walter says we know things because they have a language) [...] The task for us becomes that of recapturing the dignity of knowledge as an immediate relationship" (LY, 194).

### 3 The medium of history and tradition

Scholem appropriated the idea of knowledge within a medium not for a theory of art criticism, but for an idea of history as a textual tradition. He notes that his earliest conversations with Benjamin concerned "the essence [*Wesen*] of the historical process" (LY, 61). Shortly after their first meeting, Scholem wrote in his diary that he and Benjamin "basically have the same views on the work of history" – in short, both conceive of history as "that which is 'objective in time, an objective object that is *knowable* [*ein erkennbar Objektives*]" (LY, 64). This idea of history as that which is "objective" in time or "knowable" refers, implicitly, to the *medium* of history, which Benjamin never discusses directly in his doctoral dissertation, but which he claims was one of two "legitimate" fulfillments of the Romantic concept of the medium – the other being the concept of criticism as knowledge in the medium of art (CC, 138). We might speculate that knowledge in the medium of history would involve the constant and uniform transmission of an idea, which potentiates a "germ" that is knowable in history. I suggest that this is how Benjamin and Scholem understood tradition. As Benjamin wrote to Scholem in July 1917, "indeed, romanticism is the last movement that kept tradition alive one more time" (CWB, 89).

How are we to understand the idea of history as that which is "objective in time"? In his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin argues that the Romantics inaugurated an "objective" critique of art. What makes early Romantic art criticism objective is that it grounds the criteria of criticism in the "inner form" of the work itself, rather than appealing to subjective criteria; it takes what is objectively *knowable* in a work – i.e., its form – and raises this to absolute clarity in the medium of reflection. We could think about what is "objective in time," similarly, as the medial transformation of what is *knowable* in history: i.e., as a *form*, which is capable of virtual fulfillment. What would be grasped here would not be a series of empirical events, but the constant and uniform connection of forms in the medial unfolding of an idea.

Benjamin had initially intended to write a dissertation on Kant's concept of history, but he abandoned the project after being disappointed by Kant's

main historical writings (*Ideas for a Universal History and Perpetual Peace*).<sup>21</sup> Conceivably, the early Romantic idea of mediality came closer to what Benjamin had hoped to find in Kant. As Benjamin wrote to Scholem in the same letter of June 1917:

In one sense, whose profundity would first have to be made clear, Romanticism seeks to accomplish for religion what Kant accomplished for theoretical subjects: to reveal its form. But does religion have a form?? In any case, under history early Romanticism imagined something analogous to this. (CWB, 89)<sup>22</sup>

In the medium of reflection, the Romantics absolve the distinction between the historical and the religious into a higher unity. Benjamin clarifies that “the early Romantics did not appeal to religious and historical facts for the intimate bond between these two spheres, but rather tried to produce in their own thought and life the higher sphere in which both spheres had to coincide” (CWB, 88). Whatever cannot be raised in this way (i.e., whatever is not form) disintegrates.

Benjamin writes in a footnote to his dissertation that the essence of Romanticism should be sought in its messianism, which involves the simultaneous fulfillment of a form in its vital connection to all other forms in the medium, as well as the disintegration of whatever cannot be fulfilled in this way (CC, 117, 185). Thus, one should not conceive of the relationship between factual history and religion as an infinite task, as Kant had thought. Rather than deferring the fulfillment of history onto a world to come, the early Romantics maintain that each finite form – each “now” – is already *virtually* fulfilled. The *idea*, or absolute, is germinal in each individual work, and may be explicated by intensifying reflection in it – that is, through an immersive process of interpretation, criticism, and commentary.

The Romantics regarded a literary work of art as implicitly expressing an idea, which is fulfilled, or brought to absolute clarity, in the virtual series of a text’s critical potentiations. This critical series gives rise to a notion of tradition that must be distinguished from a chronology of events, or an empirical histo-

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin announced his intention to write on Kant’s concept of history in a letter to Scholem dated 22 October 1917. In another letter to Scholem dated 23 December 1917, Benjamin wrote of his disappointment with Kant’s conception of history (CWB, 98, 105).

<sup>22</sup> In a diary entry dated 5 November 1917, Scholem incorporates parts of Benjamin’s letter on the Romantic understanding of religion and history almost verbatim: “Could it be possible that history doesn’t have any object at all? Is history the exhibition of ideas? Can ideas be exhibited? Maybe history is itself a form, namely, that it is religion. How then can it have a different content than religion? Is it really true that ‘religion is the consciousness of the Order of things’? How can one say that history is its form? How does one go from this to tradition” (LY, 194).

ry: it suggests the virtual history of an *idea* unfolding itself in the chain of transmission of a text. The critical series corresponds to the virtual stages of an idea's successive clarifications – a series that Benjamin likens to mathematical powers, since each stage raises the previous stage to a higher degree of reflection (CC, 133). As the unfolding of an idea in a concrete *text*, this series of transmissions does not unfold in a vacuum. This idea of tradition takes shape, or unfolds *in* the medium of a work. This means that the virtual history of an idea's unfolding has an *indirect* relationship to concrete history: each work is the historically contingent presentation of an idea, and as such, historical detail is tightly interwoven with its form. But for that very reason, the historical content of a work must be sought in its immersive interpretation, rather than in a direct appeal to events.

Scholem was gripped by this idea of fastening onto the “inner form” of a work and successively raising it to absolute clarity, but he translated this idea into his own vocabulary. He regards the medium as Torah, and understands the “inner history” of its transmission – especially in commentary – as a revelation of the Torah's “inner laws”: “*Commentary is the inner form of the oral doctrine*” (LY, 170–171). Scholem's diaries circle around the idea of tradition as the continuous, methodical transformation of the Torah's inner form. Here, an esoteric truth is revealed in the stages of its transmissibility. Tradition, according to this understanding, is closer to a mathematical series than to empirical history, which Scholem confirms:

The equation History = Torah perhaps expresses the essential issue: Torah is History. The history of the Torah is the inner history of the world, with the historical process playing itself out in the unfolding of the Torah. Historiography is the science of the inner laws of the Torah (which is a history, to be sure) [...] It would be the inner relationship between mathematics and history – in Zion. (LY, 143)

Scholem likens the serial unfolding of the inner history of Torah to a process of revelation. This suggests that revelation is not an *intuition* of something esoteric and unknowable, but that it is the absolute illumination of what is *knowable*. Entirely in keeping with this understanding of revelation, Scholem refers to Benjamin's “method of revelation,” which consists of “nothing more than methodically taking up [a] dark central point [*dunkeln Mittelpunkt*] [...] and lifting it up into *absolute* clarity [*Helle*]” (LY, 255–256).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Scholem suggested that the “dark central point” of Benjamin's work is his mourning for his dead friend, the poet Fritz Heinle, who committed suicide in protest of the war. According to Scholem, Benjamin *methodically* transforms his ineffable mourning into written texts of absolute clarity, and this transformation is revelation. See Caroline Sauter's essay in this volume for a nuanced account of how Heinle's suicide haunted Benjamin's early work.

Yet, Scholem makes it clear that what is knowable in this way is only a *method*, and that this method is premised upon the impossibility of transmitting what is not communicable:

In truth, the most essential ingredient of my work is the oral teaching [...]. And in this nothing can really be written down besides the *method*. Like all textual traditions, everything else that is written down contains a paradox [...], while the core of this kind of writing can only be gleaned immanently; like the rays of light emanating out from it, it just cannot be written down. (LY, 216)

Here, Scholem distinguishes between an inner core, which cannot be expressed, and a method, which is the only thing that is communicable without paradox. His diaries give several characterizations of this inner core: in the passage I just cited, it is oral tradition, but he also describes it as “the inner center of the soul” [*innersten Zentrum*] (LY, 143), as a “disguised core” [*verhülltes Zentrum*] of the teaching, which is active whenever Torah is studied and transmitted (LY, 149), and as the *central* formation of Being, which can only be known peripherally (LY, 175).

The distinction between an inner core and a method of transmission indicates that entry into the medium of language depends on an initial act of destruction, or the sacrifice of this inexpressible center for the sake of its transmissibility. What is transmissible in the medium of language can indeed be raised to the highest degree of clarity, or revelation *within its bounds*. But this highest expression of the expressible cannot be absolute, for it is premised on the primordial destruction of the inexpressible.

Scholem’s essay on lament recollects this primordial destruction, which marks the transition from the inexpressible into expressible, transmissible language. This moment of destruction, which is simultaneously an entry into expression, is what Scholem means when he characterizes the language of lament as a “border language,” whose entire being consists in the destruction of a symbolic interiority on the way into language. Scholem regards the ruined language of lament as the extroversion of an introverted symbolism – as the fall of an expressionless truth into both knowledge and history. The ruins of the symbol can be known, even elevated to revelation; but revelation is not absolute, since it cannot reach the expressionless. We come closest to this inexpressible core by attending to the ruins of the symbolic. This is what makes the language of lament so significant for Scholem, and perhaps even more significant than the language of revelation for understanding the “teachings” of Judaism.

## 4 From the inexpressible into language: Primordial destruction in Scholem's "On Lament"

Picking up on the distinction that he frequently alludes to in his diary between an inexpressible interiority and an exteriority that is both expressible and, for that very reason, fallen, Scholem's essay "On Lament" distinguishes between the "inner core" of language [*Kern*] and its exteriorization. The inner core – identifiable with a concealed, symbolic dimension of language – can be expressed only through external signs.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Benjamin describes how a silent, material language is raised to a second order of expression when it is transposed into an acoustic medium, Scholem's distinction between an inner core and its exteriorization binds expression with the loss of truth: the exterior is not an adequate translation of the interior, but is produced only through the destruction of the inner core.<sup>25</sup> Unlike other languages, lament has no core, and this may illuminate what Scholem means when he characterizes lament as a language on the border. Lament expresses the turning-inside-out of the inner core of language, leaving nothing but a trace of the extinguished, or ruined, symbol.

Scholem does not define the symbolic, but he brings it into a constellation with two other ideas: the speechless [*die Sprachlose*] and mourning [*das Trauer*]. Scholem characterizes the speechlessness of mourning as an abrogation of the mediality of language – an idea that he puts in terms of mourning's lack of connection: mourning "is thus entirely immanent and seems to be withdrawn from any connection with other orders" (*Lament*, 315–316). This withdrawal intensifies the distinction between the inner core and its expression in

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<sup>24</sup> In his later scholarship, Scholem discusses how the Kabbalists used the metaphor of a nut comprised of an outward shell and an interior kernel to describe the distinction between the Torah's exoteric, literal meaning and an inward, esoteric meaning (1996, 51–54). It is noteworthy that Scholem elaborates on the distinction between an exoteric shell and an esoteric kernel of language within the narrative framework of the fall, since he points out that the fall of the Torah was understood as the concealment of its inward meaning by its literal meaning, for which the Kabbalists used the metaphor of a concealing garment, as well as the metaphor of shells. Scholem relates this to lament, moreover, in that the garment with which the fallen Torah is clothed is associated with the black clothes of mourning (1996, 67).

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin adopts a similar position to Scholem in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* when he describes a relationship between truth and revelation as the "burning up of the husk," implying that revelation is not continuous with the phenomenal, but involves the destruction of the exterior form of things (*OG*, 31).



language, since it goes beyond mere interiority. Using the symbolism of light as well as language, Scholem characterizes mourning as a darkness that absorbs its own radiance (*Lament*, 318). Whereas, according to Benjamin, even the mute expression of nature radiates, and hence has a kind of expression, mourning contracts inward, absorbing its own light.<sup>26</sup> This ensures that there can be no continuous transition from mourning into language, for there must be a reversal of direction – a revolution of silence, in which symbolic inwardness is destroyed.

Scholem describes the self-enclosed immanence of mourning as its peculiar magic [*Magie*] (*Lament*, 315). The affiliation of mourning and magic may seem strange, but Scholem picks up on this idea of magic when he describes lament as having been originally bound up with mythical enchantment. Scholem characterizes the world of myth as an utterly enclosed totality, which permits neither exit nor entrance (*Lament*, 318). The mythical world has the same solipsistic immanence that Scholem attributes to mourning. The introversion that Scholem ascribes to both myth and mourning cannot survive its communication. This enchanted enclosure is shattered [*zerbricht*] in the language of lament (*Lament*, 318). As Scholem argues, this shattering is what makes lament so important within the teachings [*Lehre*] of Judaism: because Judaism has banned magic and enchantment, it can appropriate myth's inner truth only through lament. The shattered language of lament, which can no longer be exploited as magic, is the sole border that Judaism maintains with myth.<sup>27</sup>

The relationship that Scholem establishes between mourning and lament – between an immanent, self-enclosed world, and a shattered, broken language – suggests an implicit Kabbalistic symbolism, which is not present in Benjamin's essay on language, and which is all the more remarkable since

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<sup>26</sup> Using italics for emphasis, Scholem distinguishes between the *Ausdruck*, or ex-pression of language, and the *Eindruck*, or im-pression made by lament, which is not only mute, but also unanswerable. That is, lament impacts other languages by depriving them of the capacity for expression (*Lament*, 316).

<sup>27</sup> Scholem's ambivalence toward mythology is also characteristic of his mature work. In *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism* (1946), he describes a paradoxical affinity between Jewish mysticism and mythology, which the rationalist tradition of Jewish philosophy eschewed. While the tradition of Jewish rationalism, from Maimonides to Cohen, strove to purify monotheism of mythology, resulting in a sterilized religion, Jewish mysticism, on the other hand, took up mythology into itself, while striving to remain within the religious framework. This had the paradoxical result that "it [mysticism] attempts to construct and to describe a world in which something of the mythical has again come to life, in terms of thought which exclude the mythical element" (Scholem 1946, 35). Arguably, Scholem articulates this paradoxical afterlife of mythology through its exclusion for the first time in "On Lament."

Scholem had only begun to study Kabbalistic literature.<sup>28</sup> Scholem's image of mourning absorbing its own light anticipates his discussion of *tsimtsum* as the inner *galut*, or exile of God into himself prior to creation. According to Scholem's later scholarship, the Lurianic idea of *tsimtsum* implies God's contraction, or withdrawal into Himself, which precedes the externalizing acts of creation and revelation.

Scholem interprets *tsimtsum* as a profound symbol of exile, projected onto the divine from the historical experiences of the Jewish people after the expulsion from Spain in 1492: "One is tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of Exile, of banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of exile that could be thought of [...]" Scholem (1946, 261) describes *tsimtsum* as "the light which streams back into God," using the same light imagery that he uses in "On Lament" to describe the withdrawn state of mourning.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, what Scholem describes as the shattering of an enclosed, mythical world in lament, resembles the shattering of the vessels in Lurianic thought. Scholem (1946, 261) interprets the shattering of the vessels as another symbol of *galut*, or the fall of creation itself, for it involves the exile of something of the Divine Being *out* of Himself. The interpretation of *Shevirath Ha-Kelim* as a symbol of exile refers to the shattering and displacement of a primordial unity:

Nothing remains in its proper place. Everything is somewhere else. But a being that is not in its proper place is in exile. Thus, since that primordial act, all being has been a being

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**28** In *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem: Jugenderinnerungen*, Scholem describes (1997, 131–132) how he had begun, in 1915, to fill notebooks with excerpts, translations, and observations about the Kabbalah, although his studies could not yet be described as scientific. In *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Scholem recounts how, in 1915, he began to study Joseph Molitor's immense work on the Kabbalah, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, noting that he discussed Molitor and the Kabbalah with Benjamin. He also acknowledges here that he had not yet gone far in the study of the primary sources (WGF, 53).

**29** Although Scholem appears to have had at least superficial knowledge of *tsimtsum* as early as 1915, mentioning the concept in a diary entry on 4 January of that year (*Tb1*, 78), it is important to underline that my argument comparing Scholem's interpretation of *tsimtsum* to the withdrawal from expression in mourning is not based on evidence that Scholem actually related these two ideas. I am claiming only a *structural* similarity. In both cases, emanation (revelation or expression) is preceded by a contraction inward, which opens a gap or hiatus between the transcendent center and its external manifestation.

in exile, in need of being led back and redeemed ... [E]verything is in some way broken, everything has a flaw, everything is unfinished. (Scholem 1996, 112–113)<sup>30</sup>

By describing mourning as a contracted immanence, and by premising its entry into language on its shattering, Scholem establishes an unbridgeable abyss between an inexpressible symbolism and human language.

## 5 The transmissible ruin

The inexpressible symbolism of mourning cannot be transmitted directly; it can only be expressed in the shattered language of lament. But lament is not merely a language of destruction; it can be regarded as a form of expression, albeit a fragmented and fallen one. Using the figure of an inner core expressed by its periphery, as well as the figure of a mythical totality expressed by a shattered language, Scholem suggests that the ruins of an inexpressible symbolism are rendered transmissible in lament. Although the inner core has been destroyed, the ruin of the symbol yields an extrinsic structure (a border), from which the contours of the extinct symbolism can be deduced.

Paradoxically, it is lament's *failure* to express the symbol that renders the "teachings" transmissible. Only an extrinsic, fragmented language can be communicated, whereas a mystical communion with the introverted symbol would necessarily remain private and momentary. Scholem's expresses this idea of transmissibility by way of a *fall* into language in his 1958 text, "Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala."<sup>31</sup> In the first aphorism, Scholem describes the paradoxical transmissibility of a secret truth, which, because it is secret, cannot be passed down, except through a fall: "Authentic tradition remains hidden; only the fallen tradition [*verfallende Tradition*] falls upon [*verfällt auf*] an object and only when it is fallen [*im Verfall*] does its greatness become visible" (Biale 1985, 70–71). A nuance is added to this idea of transmissibility through a fall in the

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**30** It is the Shekhinah (indwelling God) that goes into exile in the shattering of the vessels. In later work, Scholem (1996, 146–153) explains how, in the Lurianic Kabbalah, the exile of the Shekhinah was accompanied with rituals of lamentation. It is unclear whether an idea of the exiled Shekhinah informed Scholem's early work on lamentations, but it is noteworthy that Benjamin and Scholem discussed the meaning of the Shekhinah and its exile following Benjamin's completion of "On Language as Such." See Benjamin's letters to Scholem on 11 November 1916, and 23 May 1917 (CWB, 81–83; 86–87).

**31** First published in 1958, these aphorisms are reprinted in Scholem 1973. I am using David Biale's partial translation (1985).

ninth aphorism, in which Scholem declares that totalities [*Ganzheiten*] can be communicated only through their fragmentation. Accordingly, the divine language “cannot be expressed, for only that which is fragmentary [*Fragmentarische*] makes language expressible [*sprachbar*]” (Biale 1985, 86–87). The idea of transmissibility though a fall is already anticipated in “On Lament,” in that the externalized, hollowed-out “border language” of lament renders an introverted symbolism transmissible.

But how does this fallen, fragmented language transmit a hidden tradition? Scholem suggests what is transmissible is related to the inexpressible truth as a “constant function”:

Judaism’s philosophy of language is entirely concealed (yes, entirely) within a disguised core that is always active wherever the Torah is studied and transmitted [...] The truth, which is expressed in every verse as a general and specific truth, must perforce be a function of the applied words, with different truths ensuing from different words [...] Here it is naturally assumed that a different truth arises from a slight shift in the word order and language. With complete justice one can say that *truth is a constant function of language*. (LY, 149; emphasis in original)

Although the truth, as a disguised core, is entirely concealed, something of this core can be gleaned from its expression in language, and in particular, from the constant function with which each expression, in its slight variations, reflects a proportional transformation of the truth. This constant function is apparent not only in the slight shifts within a text, we may surmise, but also in the transmissions of a text; for the disguised core is “activated” whenever the Torah is studied and transmitted.

In the argument that an inexpressible, esoteric core can be made manifest in the constant function of its transmissibility, Scholem adopts what can be understood as a sober “mysticism of knowledge,” much like the knowledge mysticism that Benjamin attributed to the early Romantics. This “mystery of order” does not reveal the inexpressible *directly* in visions or ecstatic states. Rather, it distills what is *knowable*, deducing something of the hidden truth from the constant, functional transformation of its form.

This substitution of an ineffable symbolism for the functional transformation of what is communicable and knowable in the medium of language gives us an insight into one of the most unusual features of Scholem’s discussion of lament: namely, his insistence on lament’s *proportionality*. As Scholem writes in his diary, “The form of lamentation can perhaps be understood as the proportions of its limitations, its silence. No babbling verse can ever be lamentation, for such a verse destroys its own proportions” (LY, 211). If lament were merely a language of destruction, this proportionality, which is evidence of an order, would be incomprehensible.

Scholem explains this proportional structure as the *residue* of the symbolic in the language of lament, which he refers to as its *rhythm* (*Lament*, 318). Rhythm is the opposite of the naming language of man: it is mute, and it does not contribute anything to the cognition of an object. It is the sheer remnant of a symbolic language – a minimal structure of relations, produced by the elimination of symbolic contents. In addition to the monotonous rhythm of lament, Scholem alludes to lament's alphabetical acrostic structure as a remnant of the symbolic (*Lament*, 318). What rhythm and the alphabetic acrostic have in common is that they both transmit an order or proportionality in a sequence of relations. This proportionality is exposed only when the symbolic contents of language have been annihilated.<sup>32</sup> In this way, the poetry of lament can be said to translate the silent, withdrawn core of mourning into a configuration of consonants and sounds. So understood, lament expresses the magic of mourning through the *overcoming* of its own intrinsic magic. In the configuration of these fragments of language – in rhythm and alphabetical characters – the language of lament points, but only points, toward an infinitely inaccessible symbolic order.

## 6 Conclusion

It is tempting to speculate that Scholem's essay on lament goes beyond a theory of language by implicating the language of lament in a symbolic narrative of exile. This hypothesis would resonate with Scholem's own suggestion regarding the *exilic* symbolism of *tsimtsum* and the shattering of the vessels. According to Moshe Idel, it is one of the achievements of Scholem's later scholarship (as compared to his earlier, metaphysical work) that he accomplishes the *intertwinement* of concrete historical events and the symbolic order: "The tears of a lachrymose history have been crystallized into kabbalistic symbols, which serve as mirrors by which Jewish history receives its meaning" (Idel 2010, 92).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In his explanation of the proportionality of lament, Scholem writes that lament is the expression of the elimination of the object, which becomes expressionless: "The expression of lament [*der Klagende Ausdruck*] is metaphysically conditioned by the elimination of an object's identity. All lamentation grieves that it loses its object: that the object loses its metaphysical constancy and thus becomes expressionless [*Ausdruckslos*]. It is precisely the *countenance* of this process that makes up the expression of lament [*der Klagende Ausdruck*]" (*LY*, 211).

<sup>33</sup> In *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Scholem advances the hypotheses that this symbolism was "almost inextricably intertwined with the historical experience of the Jewish people" (Scholem 1996, 2).

Before agreeing with Idel about the merits of this achievement, and whether we can find evidence of it already in “On Lament” (which is certainly meta-physical, rather than philological or historical), we should ask about the possibility of relating the symbolic to history in this way. It would be relatively plausible to suggest the “intertwining” of concrete historical events and a symbolic order in this text: written at the height of World War I, the essay makes no mention of the war or its catastrophic wake, but draws its destructive energy into the heart of language itself: death and suicide, annihilation and ruin, are taken up in the “life-cycle” of language, and thus elevated to an eternal order.

But the relationship between history and the symbolic cannot be reduced to a causal or external one. There is another indirect, abstruse relationship to history in the very structure of Scholem’s text, which premises the entry into tradition on the destruction of the esoteric teaching at its core. Scholem’s argument reflects history indirectly in the sense that it could only have been written at a moment of extreme impoverishment of a traditional way of life, combined with an extreme will to tradition (by which I do not just mean Scholem’s subjective will to tradition, but the neo-Romantic longing of an entire generation, both Zionist and German).

Like the Jena Romantics, who insinuated themselves, as author-critics, into the “inner history” of a form, ensuring a literary work’s afterlife through the very destruction of that work’s own integral unity and content, Scholem also seeks to guarantee the afterlife of tradition by regarding it as a knowable ruin, and inserting himself, as commentator, into the virtual continuum of its transmissibility. The afterlife of tradition is thus made to rest on the commentator, who has a free hand to generate the transmissible series of a text’s form out of the destruction of its integral unity, out of its ruins. Scholem thus relegates the “teaching” itself to pre-history, ensuring that the entry into history proper involves the destruction of its symbolic content and its extroversion as a method.

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- CC        Walter Benjamin. “On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism.” 1919. *SW1* (see below) 116–220.
- CWB     Walter Benjamin. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

- GS* Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 7 volumes. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989.
- Lament* Gershom Scholem. “On Lament and Lamentation.” 1917–1918. Trans. Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel. 313–319 in this volume. German original: see *Klage* below.
- Language* Walter Benjamin. “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man.” 1916. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *SW* 1 62–74. German original: “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen.” *GS* 2.1 140–157.
- LY* Gershom Scholem. *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*. Ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Klage* Gershom Scholem. “Über Klage und Klagelied.” 1917–1918. *Tb* 2 (see below) 128–133. For English translation, see *Lament* above.
- OG* Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.
- SW* Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. 4 vols. Michael Jennings et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1996–2003.
- Tb* Gershom Scholem. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. 2 vols. Ed. Karlfried Gründer. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000.
- WGF* Gershom Scholem. *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975. For English translation, see *WSF* below.
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Section Seven:  
**Translations of Gershom Scholem's Texts  
on Lament**



Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel  
**Translators' Introduction**

“Über Klage und Klagelied,” written in 1917–1918 and translated here as “On Lament and Lamentation,” was part of a series of texts, fragmentary notes, and translations authored by the young Gershom Scholem (b. Berlin 1897–d. Jerusalem 1982) on the theme of lament [*kinah*].<sup>1</sup> Alongside “On Lament and Lamentation,” this volume provides the first English translations of three other texts by Scholem on the subject of lament: “A Medieval Lament” (1919–1920), “Job’s Lamentation” (1918), and “Ezekiel Chapter 19: A Lamentation for Israel’s Last Princes” (1918), which accompany his own translations of the laments into German.

## **1 Scholem’s “work of mourning”: Conception and contextualization**

Scholem’s preoccupation with lamentations coincided with the political convulsions of the First World War, as well as a period of intense personal crisis. During this time, the young Scholem became increasingly engaged with Jewish history and specifically with the issue of the loss of tradition in a modern environment. Scholem’s extensive work on lamentations has rightly been considered a “work of mourning” [*avodat evel*; *Trauerarbeit*] over a Judaism lost (Shedlezky 2007). Scholem’s intensive engagement with the textual corpus and language of lament is less a matter of melancholic withdrawal than an attempt to productively mourn and by extension counteract the withering of tradition via “inscription” in the form of commentary, essay, and translation (Weidner 2003, 21).

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<sup>1</sup> The translation and annotation of Scholem’s texts on lament has been a collaborative project in the truest sense, with each of us weighing in at every stage. Lina Barouch is responsible for the initial version of this introduction, and Paula Schwebel composed the first English version of “On Lament and Lamentation,” but every word of the final versions has been discussed and reworked jointly. Paula Schwebel translated Scholem’s shorter texts and is responsible for most of the annotations, with help from Lina Barouch. A version of our translation of Scholem’s “On Lament and Lamentation” has previously been published in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21.1 (2014): 4–12, and we are grateful for permission to reprint this material here. We also gratefully acknowledge the invaluable suggestions of Ilit Ferber, Vivian Liska, Anne Pollok, Josef Cernohous, and the careful external review of Dominic Bonfiglio.

Scholem finds in the lamentations [*kinot*] a bequeathed idiom into which he may inscribe his perception of loss and thereby resist the seeming disintegration of Jewish tradition. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi argues that in the past, the literary form of lamentation had helped preserve collective memory in a community in which a mythical (and martyrological) view of history predominated. The literature of lamentation, moreover, had served as an instructional model for future persecuted generations, teaching them to understand their suffering as a consequence of having erred, and helping them to reaffirm their faith (DeKoven Ezrahi 1982, 100–101). Scholem's fascination with the lament form should be understood not only in this traditional sense, but also as a manifestation of "the lamentation tradition in transition," a re-functioning of the tradition that is exhibited as well in other major writers such as Haim Nachman Bialik (Mintz 1984).

In Bialik's poems, this transition is marked by the fact that his influences came both from within and from outside of the Jewish tradition. Paradigmatic is Bialik's poem entitled "In the City of Slaughter." Written in 1905 in response to the Kishinev pogrom, the poem arguably both summons and transforms almost the entire Jewish corpus of literary motifs that engage with destruction (Mintz 1984, 8). Bialik achieves an inversion by maintaining the traditional symbols and constructs even as he refashions their context and significance, thus also still serving the community's need for an elegist (DeKoven Ezrahi 1982, 102).

Scholem represents the transition in the tradition of lamentation in another sense. First, he responds predominantly to the loss of tradition, understood in part as the withdrawal of divine presence. Scholem affirms the crisis in covenantal dialogue, registered in the *kinot*, and particularly in the book of Lamentations, by developing lament as a language that has no addressee and permits no answer. This structural feature is reiterated by Scholem's distinction between *Klage* [lament] and *Anklage* [accusation], the latter of which enables a form of dialogue. Second, while Scholem makes use of the traditional poetic discourse of lamentation, he attempts to undo the signifying aspect of its language, i.e., to disengage from direct reference to concrete historical events. In this way he wishes to absorb the historical into a metaphysical realm, where the fall of language as such is of primary implication. Bialik, in contrast, renders the traditional lament literature relevant by introducing its symbols and images in response to concrete *contemporary* events. While his elegies evoke the covenantal paradigm, they defy the traditional understanding of punishment, thus achieving a sense of alienation (Mintz 1984, 8).

To engage in his "work of mourning" Scholem did not compose his own elegies, but rather embarked on an ongoing project of translation and detailed

commentary. It may be argued that Scholem reached a form of deliberate alienation first by transposing several *kinot* from Hebrew into German, a project he paradoxically deemed impossible. The commentaries accompanying his translations also display influences from outside the traditional literature of lamentations; these include his concurrent mathematical and philosophical studies, his keen interest in German literature, his increased study of Jewish history and texts, and not least his joint readings and discussions with Walter Benjamin.

## 2 Lament and language

These diverse perspectives focus to a great extent on the question of language, which lies at the heart of Scholem's "On Lament and Lamentation."<sup>2</sup> Scholem explicitly regarded this essay as a continuation of Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" (*Tb2*, 88; *Language*, 62–74). Benjamin in turn commented on Scholem's translations, and they discussed topics such as the lament of nature, Benjamin's short 1916 essay "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," and lamentations by Rilke and Else Lasker-Schüler (*SW1*, 88–123; *Tb2*: 88; Scholem 1981, 65). The relationship between lament and poetry was explored in these discussions (Weigel 2000); however, Scholem's main texts on the topic of lament favor an inquiry into the relationship between linguistic expression and revelation, destruction and transmissibility (Shedletzky 2007; Weidner 2003, 191, 196).

In general for Scholem, language seems to capture the issue of divine revelation and its transmission in human language, the "fall" of which he anxiously follows as a result of secularization and the renewal of Hebrew. Thus language, and especially Hebrew, emerges in many of Scholem's texts as an indicator and even an instigator of a dialectic of destruction and redemption.<sup>3</sup> Scholem regards lament as a unique linguistic order, in which the object that is communicated – mourning – is paradoxically destroyed through its expression. The collapse of language is registered not only in the annihilation of the object of signification, but also in the collapse of a dialogical structure: in his commentary to "Job's Lament" Scholem claims that the language of lament

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<sup>2</sup> In his diaries we find numerous, more or less fragmentary and hermetic reflections on the relationship between language and mathematics (*Tb1*, 264, 467–468), and on the issue of semiotics and the Torah (*Tb1*, 468, 434).

<sup>3</sup> A paradigmatic expression of Scholem's watchful anxiety regarding the secularization of Hebrew can be found in "On Our Language: A Confession" (Scholem 2009 [1926], 168–169).

captures the crisis in the covenantal dialogue, for God cannot respond to lament [*Klage*], in contrast to the dialogical horizon of the language of accusation [*Anklage*]. Scholem reiterates the distinction between lament and accusation in his critique of Bialik's poetry, which he denounces as a form of accusation rather than lament (*Tb2*, 375–376).<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Lament and translation

Although written as an epilogue to Scholem's German translation of the book of Lamentations, "On Lament and Lamentation" does not engage with translation in an obvious or direct way. Nonetheless, Scholem's early theory of language put forth in this essay invites questions about how he understood translation, first and foremost because it develops lament as a "language of the border," situated between two linguistic spheres. We may therefore ask whether the fundamental liminality of lamentation postulates metaphorical acts of translation: for example, whether the destructive expression of lament's object, or "mental being" [*geistiges Wesen*] – mourning – marks the ferocious transference of an esoteric core onto a shattered exteriority (as Paula Schwebel [2014] writes elsewhere). Similarly, does liminality denote the tension between "domesticating" and "foreignizing" processes that are part and parcel of the act of translation?<sup>5</sup> Is lamentation's location on the border, in a non-territory, reminiscent of Benjamin's interlinear locus of translation, which points toward a "pure language" (*SW1* 253–263)? What Scholem describes in his essay as the (self-)destructive leaps of lamentation into the land of a symbolic language does seem to indicate the violent incursions or annexations sometimes attributed to acts of translation (Venuti 1992, 1–17). These are only a few of the issues regarding translation evoked by "On Lament and Lamentation," which remain largely unanswered in the essay itself.

Scholem's introduction to the medieval lament, *Sha'ali serufa* (1919–1920), which he likewise translated into German, provides clues to his early thoughts on translation. In discussing the aims and pragmatic steps of his translation

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<sup>4</sup> Scholem criticizes the lack of lament in the Zionist publication *Jiskor* (*Memorial Prayer*). Scholem translated the original 1916 Yiddish edition *Yizkor: zum andenken die gefallene wächter un arbeiter in erets israel* (Ben-Zvi, 1916) into German: *Jiskor: Ein Buch des Gedenkens an gefallene Wächter und Arbeiter im Lande Israel* (Buber, 1918).

<sup>5</sup> These are the English terms used by Lawrence Venuti in discussing Friedrich Schleiermacher's theory of translation (Venuti 1992, 1–17).

from Hebrew to German, this short introduction displays a marked ambivalence about the possibilities and limits of introducing the Hebrew-language *piyut* into a German literary context. Scholem perhaps unintentionally alludes to Hölderlin's translations of Pindar, which he had discussed with Benjamin (Tb2, 417), by using the term "hard joining" [*harte Fügung*] from von Hellin-grath's 1911 introduction to Hölderlin's translations, in order to partly describe the Hebrew *piyut* from northern France and Germany.<sup>6</sup> Intriguingly, he bases the "hard joining" of the medieval *piyut* on the distinctive suffix-rhyme *-ayikh*, which bears a crucial sonic relationship to the canonical word *eikhah*. Scholem states that in order not to destroy the linguistic essence of infinity in the act of translation, the rhyme element must be abandoned.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Scholem rules out the possibility of translating the Hebrew rhyme sequences into German.

It has been rightly argued that Scholem's initial reflections on the practice of translation in his introduction to *Sha'ali serufa* are very close to Benjamin's early ideas on translation (Ferber 2013, 183–184). Generally, both thinkers develop a metaphysics of language based on reflections on their own translation practices (during this period Benjamin was translating poems of Baudelaire) (Ferber 2013, 184). By forsaking the aspiration to transfer the symbolic meaning of lament's words in order to achieve the "infinity of their inner ascent," Scholem comes close to Benjamin's argument on translation: for translation traces an *a priori*, harmonic confluence between languages, according to Benjamin, something that emerges as "a pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning" (SW1, 257).<sup>8</sup> The forced transference of signification from one language to the other is therefore deemed obsolete and unfavorable. In Scholem's writings on translation between 1915 and 1920 there emerge several more affinities with Benjamin's theory of translation, most notably Scholem's insistence that a translation should not seek to be accessible and that it has the right to be uncompromising and challenging (Groiser 2007, 273).

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6 We thank Galili Shahar for referring us to the translation of "harte Fügung" into English as "hard joining."

7 According to Scholem, the linguistic essence of infinity, originally supported by the Hebrew rhyme structure, should be sought through the "purest possible intensification of the words" in the target language. Not a strained transfer of formal (rhyme) structures but rather their conscious abandonment in favor of alternative features that already exist in the target language.

8 For a discussion of Benjamin's translation theory and "pure language" in the context of the idea of laments, see Ferber 2014.



## 4 The English translations

“Über Klage und Klagelied” was included in the second volume (2000) of the German edition of Scholem’s *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. Anthony David Skinner’s excellent English translation of a selection from Scholem’s diaries, aptly entitled *Lamentations of Youth* (2007), opted not to include Scholem’s theoretical essays, including his numerous short texts on lament. Our joint translation “On Lament and Lamentation,” and Paula Schwebel’s translations of his other short texts on lament, endeavor to bring Scholem’s work on lament to an Anglophone audience. These translations also complement numerous new interpretations of Scholem’s essay, some of which are published for the first time in this volume.

In addition to translating Scholem’s shorter commentaries on the different laments, Paula Schwebel has provided English translations of Scholem’s own translations into German of three Hebrew-language laments: “Job’s Lament,” “Ezekiel Chapter 19: A Dirge over Israel’s Last Princes”, and *Sha’ali serufa*, which Scholem translated under the title “A Medieval Lament.” These translations into English struck us as beneficial, since Scholem’s commentaries make reference to his own idiosyncratic renderings; his choices as a translator illuminate his interpretations, and the Job and Ezekiel excerpts differ significantly from the German biblical translation by Luther and the standard English versions. Providing Scholem’s German gives readers a sense of what cannot be fully conveyed in the English translation: Scholem’s rhythm, accentuation, and meter.

The specific choices that Scholem makes as a translator often support the key features of his accompanying commentaries. For instance, even though Scholem’s translation of Job’s lament often opts for the same concrete images as the Luther translation,<sup>9</sup> Scholem deliberately departs from the Luther version when it supports his interpretation. In his commentary, Scholem argues that Job’s lament exhibits a circular structure – linked to the law of recurrence – which explains the peculiar infinity of lament.<sup>10</sup> His translation thus ends with the idea of turmoil’s recurrence: “Und wiederkehrt das Toben” [“and turmoil recurs”], whereas Luther translated the Hebrew verb *ve-yavo* [and shall come/arrive] more literally as “Und es kommt solche Unruhe!” [“and such unrest arrives”], giving no intimation of the cyclical character imagined by Schol-

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<sup>9</sup> Scholem adopts Luther’s “Wimperm der Morgenröte” [“lashes of dawn”] verbatim.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the question “Why does he give light to the suffering?” receives no answer, but recurs infinitely.

em. Moreover, Scholem chooses to begin several phrases with the word “nicht,” which frequently precedes a verb in accordance with the original Hebrew syntax. This construction, which we were unable to reproduce in the English rendition, allows Scholem to de-emphasize the subject and the object in favor of a *movement* of negation, which he refers to in his commentary as the “linguistic structure of liquefaction” [*Zerfließen*]. By using the simple past instead of the present perfect, and by eliminating the use of modal verbs, Scholem achieves a much shorter, more accentuated rhythm than one finds in Luther’s translation.<sup>11</sup>

The congruence between Scholem’s interpretation and the choices he makes as a translator are also visible in his treatment of “Ezekiel Chapter 19.” Scholem’s commentary on this lament focuses on the final sentence, which he translates as “Ein Klagelied ist dies und ward zum Klagelied” [“This is a lamentation and has become a lamentation”]. Scholem distinguishes between two tenses of the verb “to be,” “ist” and “ward,” in order to mark the transformation of a prophetic lament into an object of tradition, in which the prophecy has been fulfilled. In “Ezekiel Chapter 19,” God calls upon the prophet to raise a lament; the fulfillment of the prophecy (the fall of Israel’s princes), both gives rise to the lament and simultaneously confirms the veracity of God’s word, since what had been prophesied really does come to pass. Scholem emphasizes the completion or fulfillment of the prophetic lament by using the past tense of the verb “ward” in order to account for the simultaneity of past and future Hebrew tenses within the original Hebrew text [*va-tehi*], and the idea of an “infinite present” in Judaism – issues prompting repeated reflection in Scholem’s diaries (see *Tb2*, 305, 324). In this Scholem clearly diverges from Luther’s version, which misses the temporal implications of prophecy evoked by Scholem’s translation.<sup>12</sup>

Our translations have attempted to strike a balance between generating an accessible text for an English readership and partially keeping the idiosyncrasies of the original in place. In other words, we wished to produce texts that are approachable without entirely undoing the hermetic, esoteric form of the originals. The annotations serve three main purposes: to clarify specific choi-

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11 Where Luther translates, “Derselbe Tag müsse finster sein, und Gott von obenherab müsse nicht nach ihm fragen; kein Glanz müsse über ihn scheinen!” (*Bibel* 1545, “Das Buch Hiob” 3.4, Web), Scholem writes, “Nicht forsche nach ihm Gott von oben und nicht erscheine über ihm ein Licht.”

12 The Luther version translates the final sentence as “Das ist ein kläglich und jämmerlich Ding” [“This is a lamentable and miserable thing”] (*Bibel* 1545, “Der Prophet Hesekiel” 19.14, Web).

ces made by the translators, to underline unresolved ambiguities within the original texts, and to provide interpretative explanations of key terms and references to relevant literature.

Gershom Scholem

## On Lament and Lamentation

All language is infinite.<sup>1</sup> But there is one language whose infinity is deeper and different from all others (besides the language of God). For whereas every language is always a positive expression of a being, and its infinity resides in the two bordering lands of the revealed and the silenced [*Verschwiegenen*], such that it actually stretches out over both realms, this language is different from any other language in that it remains throughout on the border [*Grenze*], exactly on the border between these two realms.<sup>2</sup> This language reveals nothing, because the being that reveals itself in it has no content (and for that reason one can also say that it reveals everything) and conceals [*verschweigt*] nothing, because its entire existence is based on a revolution of silence [*Schweigen*]. It is not symbolic, but only points toward the symbol; it is not concrete [*gegenständlich*], but annihilates the object. This language is lament.

Lament is certainly not the opposite of any type of language, such as jubilation, happiness, or the like, as a chaotic approach would suggest. Rather, the opposite of lament is only revelation itself, and for that reason it can be overcome or transformed through no other means than by leading it toward revelation. For happiness has an inner core [*Kern*], but lament is nothing other than a language on the border, language of the border itself.<sup>3</sup> Everything it says is infinite, but just and only infinite with regard to the symbol. In lament, nothing is expressed and everything is implied. Lament is the only possible (and in a unique way, really actualized) volatile [*labile*] language. That is to say, each language can return to itself, can leave its sphere, enter other spheres

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is found in the original German in *Tb2*, 128–33. According to a diary entry from 3 December 1917, Scholem wrote it on 2 December, as an afterword to his translation of the book of Lamentations, which he had completed the previous day. The fair copy was dated “January 1918.” Whereas A. D. Skinner has translated the title of Scholem’s essay as “On Lament and Dirge” (in *LY*, 2007), we have chosen to translate it as “On Lament and Lamentation,” preserving the distinctions among the three German terms that Scholem uses: *Klage*, *Klagelied*, and *Totenklage*, which we have translated as “lament,” “lamentation,” and “dirge,” respectively.

<sup>2</sup> It would have been possible to translate *Verschwiegenen* as “concealed,” and perhaps the opposition of the concealed and the revealed would be more intuitive. However, we have translated this as “silenced,” given the importance that Scholem places on silence throughout this text and in his diaries.

<sup>3</sup> We translate Scholem’s term *Kern* as “inner core,” since this allows us to bring out Scholem’s consistent opposition between language’s exteriorization in expression and its inexpressible interiority (for which Scholem uses the related term *Mittelpunkt* later in the text).

and return, saturated with other orders. But once lament has left its line [*Linie*], it can never win itself back, except by annihilating the revelation that impedes it:<sup>4</sup> the essence of lament is irretrievably lost once it is no longer border. Lament has no stability.

Lament proves itself to be the genuine opposition of revelation in yet another respect.<sup>5</sup> While lament encompasses all other languages as a unity, it does so in a way that is precisely contrary to revelation: that is, not as a unity of the all, but as a unity of the particular. For if revelation means the stage at which each language is absolutely positive and expresses nothing more than the positivity of the linguistic world – the birth of language (not its origin!) – then lament is precisely the stage at which each language suffers death in a truly tragic sense, in that this language expresses nothing, absolutely nothing positive, but only the pure border. Since, as we have already mentioned, each language lies in both realms – that of the revealed, expressed [*Aussprechlichen*], and that of the symbolized, silenced [*Verschwiegenen*] – so in its transition each language partakes of lament as its genuinely tragic point. (The language of tragedy is *most intimately* related to lament.) Language in the state of lament annihilates itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of annihilation [*Vernichtung*]. Everything is at its mercy. It repeatedly attempts to become symbol, but this must always fail, because it is border. In this way, the infinity of lament is directed completely [*restlos*] toward the symbol: the transition from symbol to lament is different than that from lament to content. In human language, the latter transition is not at all feasible, although it can possibly be (and is probably) accomplished in other languages. There are no nuances in lament, just as there are no nuances in revelation. Thus, one lament cannot be meaningfully translated into another, since this translation transforms nothing, unless it plummets [*stürze*] out of its

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4 Original: “Die Klage aber kann, hat sie einmal ihre Linie verlassen, nie sich wiedergewinnen, außer durch Vernichtung der Offenbarung, die sie daran verhindert.” We puzzled over how to translate this sentence, since the referent of the second *sie* is ambiguous. Dominic Bonfiglio helped us realize that the most logical translation is that revelation is what impedes lament (rather than lament impeding revelation). As Bonfiglio points out, the only ambiguity that persists is whether the final clause is nonrestrictive or restrictive. That is, should lament annihilate revelation *tout court* (all of which impedes lament from winning itself back), or should lament annihilate only that part of revelation that impedes lament from winning itself back? The alternative would be: “But once lament has left its line [*Linie*], it can never win itself back, except by annihilating revelation, which impedes it [from winning itself back].”

5 Whereas at first Scholem describes lament as the “opposite” [*Gegenteil*] of revelation, now he refers to lament as the “genuine opposition” of revelation [*eigentliche Gegensatzung*]. This may imply an activity of opposition, rather than a static contrast (*Tb2*, 128–129).

lability and becomes something else. But lament, as long as it is lament, remains always the same: there is only *one* border between the linguistic realms of speech and silence.<sup>6</sup> Were there more than one border, they would enclose an area in which lament would correspond with a mental being that is not purely symbolic. But the mental being whose language is lament is *mourning*, the concreteness [*Gegenständlichkeit*] of which is of an exclusively symbolic nature.<sup>7</sup>

Mourning, which we have described as a mental being, should of course not be said to designate an object in any concrete [*konkreten*] sense. The description of mourning as a symbolic object (which is more than a defense and which conveys something about the very nature of mourning) should prevent the misunderstanding, as if conceptual realism were at work here. Mourning is a condition of each thing, a state into which everything can fall, but the epitome of this state for each thing refers to an *idea* of this condition, and it is this idea that this examination concerns.

Mourning and lament stand in an unambiguous relationship to each other. Of course, mourning lies wholly in the realm of symbolic objects: it denotes for each thing the first order of the symbolic. Mourning is not itself a border in the realm of objects, but it is infinitely close to the border. And therefore its derivation in language is precisely the border itself. Of all symbolic languages, the language of mourning contains the deepest paradox, because its concreteness annihilates itself. Even the most silent gesture, the mutest word, succumbs to this paradox. The magic of mourning is thus entirely immanent and

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6 Although we use the English word “between” in this sentence, it is worth noting that Scholem uses the German word *von* rather than *zwischen*: *Es gibt nur eine Grenze der sprachlichen Reiche von Reden und Schweigen* (Tb2, 129). It is not clear whether this raises a conceptually significant point about how Scholem understands the “border” separating speech and silence. Elsewhere in this essay, however, Scholem does use the word *zwischen* to characterize the border language of lament, referring to “ihre besondere Grenzhaftigkeit zwischen den sprachlichen Reichen” (Tb2, 131).

7 Scholem takes the term “mental being” [*geistiges Wesen*] from Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man.” According to Benjamin, all expression of the contents of mind, and not just communication in words, should be understood as language. Benjamin distinguishes a “mental being,” which expresses itself in language, from a “linguistic being” [*sprachliches Wesen*], which refers only to what is communicable in a mental being (*Language*, 64–65). Whereas Scholem regards mourning as the mental being to which lament corresponds, he does not consider lament to be the linguistic being of mourning, since the expression of lament emerges only through the paradoxical destruction of this being, or the self-overturning of mourning. Scholem registers this paradox involved in the expression of mourning by referring to lament as its “linguistic derivation” [*Ableitung in der Sprache*] rather than its linguistic being (Tb2, 130).

seems to be withdrawn from any connection with other orders. As such, the most powerful revolution of mourning's innermost center [*Mittelpunktes*] is necessary (through the restoration [*Zurückführung*] of the symbolic to revelation) in order to induce mourning's self-overturning, which, as a result of its own reversal, allows for the course toward language to emerge as expression. It is the essential law of mourning, which can only be recognized as such here, that it cannot escape this revolution, as long as its purity is not otherwise marred. Thus mourning partakes in language, but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself – and against language. What appears here is the truest anarchy, which emerges most clearly in the impression made by lament, in the utter inability of other things to answer lament in their language. There is no answer to lament, which is to say, there is only one: falling mute [*das Verstummen*]. Here again lament shows itself to be the deep opposition of revelation, which is the linguistic form that absolutely demands an answer and enables one. One cannot even answer lament with a lament itself. For to answer lament means wanting to give mourning, which is directed only toward its own downfall, another direction. Only One can answer lament: God himself, who through revelation evoked it [i.e., lament] out of the revolution of mourning.

What share symbolic objects have in that connection of things whose idea we call teaching [*Lehre*] is a question of great significance.<sup>8</sup> Teaching encompasses not only language, but also, in a unique way, that which lacks language [*das Sprachlose*], the silenced, to which mourning belongs. The teaching that is not expressed, nor alluded to in lament, but that is kept silent, is silence itself. And therefore lament can usurp any language: it is always the not empty, but extinguished expression, in which its death wish and its inability to die join together. The expression of innermost expressionlessness, the language of silence is lament. This language is infinite, but it has the infinity of annihilation, which is, as it were, the ultimate power [*Potenz*] of what has been extinguished. The latter never reaches the finite, because even its highest intensity, which is based on annihilation (of mourning), is counteracted by something

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<sup>8</sup> *Lehre* (teaching or doctrine) is another term that Scholem developed, at least in part, through his ongoing discussion with Benjamin. In *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Scholem gives a retrospective account of the importance of this term for Benjamin's (and implicitly, his own) thought between the years 1915 and 1927. According to Scholem, Benjamin's use of *Lehre* included but surpassed the philosophical realm and was interpreted as "instruction," in the sense of the original meaning of *torah* in Hebrew. Instruction was not limited to the "true condition and way of man" in the world, but it also taught about the "transcausal connection of things and their rootedness in God" [*den transkausalen Zusammenhang der Dinge und ihr Verfaßstein in Gott*] (WGF, 73; WSF, 69).

that owes its infinity to revelation. Lament is a completely unsymbolic language, since there is no symbol of a symbol. It is only symbolic in relation to that in mourning, which itself is neither a symbol nor an object, but *was* a symbol and an object; now, however, in annihilation, it signifies the infinite nothing, the zero [Null] to an infinite degree: the expressionless, the extinguished. But this does not mean that lament is a completely concrete [*sachliche*] language<sup>9</sup> – on the contrary, since the object [*Sache*] would here be annihilation itself. Rather, lament founds a completely autonomous order, which has already been recognized above as the language of the border.

That lament can be transmitted belongs to the great, truly mystical laws of the peoplehood [*Volkstum*]. Not to everybody, but only to the children of one's own people can lament be passed down. What unheard-of [*unerhörte*] revolutions must a people undergo to make its lament transmissible: that an entire people speaks in the language of silence can only be surmised [*geahnt werden*]. The most eminent example of this kind is perhaps the destruction of the Temple, the lament for which has been passed down to our day. (In ancient Israel [another example] might be the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, after which David ordered that the children of Judah be taught his dirge [*Totenklage*]).<sup>10</sup>

Every lament can be expressed as poetry, since its particular liminality between the linguistic realms, its tragic paradox, makes it so. (This is also why Hebrew has only one word both for lament [*Klage*] and lamentation [*Klagelied*]: *Kinah*.) Perhaps, indeed, the languages of symbolic objects have no other possibility to become languages of poetry except in the state of lament. And how much more clearly this appears in human lament! The infinite tension that inflames each word of lament, as if to make it cry – there is hardly any other

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<sup>9</sup> We have chosen to use “concrete” for three terms used by Scholem to describe language in this text: *gegenständliche*, *konkrete*, and *sachliche*. These could potentially be translated as “referential,” “concrete,” and “factual” (language), respectively. We opted for the word “concrete” to avoid imposing strict linguistic or scholarly terminology on Scholem's text. The term “concrete” is also crucially used by Scholem in relation to language and its “realization” or “concretization” in his ninth “unhistorical aphorism” on the Kabbalah: “The ‘true’ language cannot be spoken, just as the absolutely concrete cannot be realized” (quoted in Biale 1985, 87).

<sup>10</sup> 2 Samuel 1.17–27 begins with an explicit command to teach the Judahites the dirge for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. “And David intoned this dirge over Saul and his son Jonathan – he ordered the Judahites to be taught ‘The Bow’” (2 Samuel 1.17–18). Scholem translated the Song of the Bow following the death of his best friend, Edgar Blum, who was wounded in the war and passed away on 1 November 1916. According to Skinner, Scholem's reference to the lament for Saul and Jonathan is a hidden memorial to his friend – a silent tribute, taken up into the textual tradition (*LY*, 164). This hypothesis is also suggested by Scholem's remark, “The time will come to erect for my best friend a living monument” (*Tb1*, 416; *LY*, 147).



word in human languages that cries and falls silent more than the Hebrew word *איכה* (*eikhah*) [how], with which the dirges begin – the infinite force with which each word negates itself and sinks back into the infinity of silence, in which the word's emptiness [*Leere*] becomes teaching [*Lehre*], but above all the infinity of mourning itself, which destroys itself in lament as rhythm, prove lament to be poetry. The silent rhythm, the monotony of lament is the only thing that remains: as the only thing that is symbolic in lament – a symbol, namely, of being extinguished [*Erloschensein*] in the revolution of mourning, as was said above. But the very inviolability of rhythm in relation to words is what, in the most elementary sense, constitutes all poetry. Monotony is the deep linguistic symbol of expressionlessness, which sends its radiance inward, and of the darkness of all mourning, which absorbs its own light. Each word appears only to die, and perhaps one may venture to assume that the artistic form of most late Hebrew lamentations – the alphabetical acrostic – has a symbolic meaning that is at least connected with the fact that lament encompasses *all* language and destroys all language.<sup>11</sup> The acrostic is the magical form in which the infinity of language is spellbound. Lament is thus in poetry what death is in the sphere of life.

Lamentation is, in its deepest sense, mythical. In it, myth itself seeks exit to a world to which there is no access, in which one can and cannot be, but into which, since eternity, no one can reach from another world. In lamentation, mythical enchantment (with which it was perhaps originally enmeshed) is shattered by the unheard-of linguistic phenomenon of the border. The order of lament itself destroys the possibility of exploiting its magic as enchantment: enchanted words must not be tragic. For this reason, and because mythical reality – which consumes itself within the song of lament – is of such great internal truth, could Judaism, as it overcame myth and banned enchantment, absorb lament within itself. In this way, the Hebrew *kinah* arose. David's dirge for Saul and Jonathan, the lamentations for the destruction of the first Temple,

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<sup>11</sup> Scholem's note in the text reads: "The magical character of the acrostic in the domain of the spell is now considered proven." Scholem also pursues the theme of the magical character of the acrostic form in an undated, double-sided sheet entitled "Notiz über das alphabetische Akrostichon" ("Note on the Alphabetic Acrostic"): "*Alphabetic acrostic* as a magical instrument can, without doubt, still be found in the Gaonic period [...]. It is probable to suppose that these mystics (*yorde merkabah*, descenders to the chariot) were not only pursuing rationally clear ends with this arrangement (mnemonics), but that it had a mystical background: to procure some effect through the proper order of the hymns, and the proper one meant for them precisely the mystically given order of the alphabet. These alphabetical hymns also have the typical doubled infinity of the acrostic and of the inner infinite repetition of the attributes: the intensive and the extensive" (*Tb2*, 551).

and Jehuda Halevi's lament for Jerusalem in the *Zionide*, or that of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg for the burning of the Torah שרופה שאלי (*sha'ali serufa*),<sup>12</sup> mark the three stages of this path, which signifies the attempt to elevate lament to the perspective of the divine. Naturally, along this path lament itself dies, and only the ever-recurring force of the border phenomenon prevents lament from becoming stable, which means nothing other than symbolic babble. For this people, teaching and lament were intertwined such that it could come to pass that the teaching lamented and lament taught, without causing the orders to collapse, as endangered as they were. For the great misfortune that was their destiny gave rise again and again to mourning, and the mourning revolutionized itself in lament, and lament dies before God with the teaching for the sake of [um] this people's soul.

The orders of creation itself preserve lament from downfall, a fact that is expressed in a deeper way in an *aggadah* in the *petichtah* of the *midrash Eikhah Rabbati* – the famous “entrance to the great lament,” in which God himself laments over the Temple.<sup>13</sup> So long as the inviolability of silence is not threatened, men and things will continue to lament, and precisely this constitutes the grounds of our hope for the restitution of language, of reconciliation: for, indeed, it was language that suffered the fall into sin, not silence.

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12 Scholem translated this lament under the title of “Ein mittelalterliches Klagelied” and published his translation, along with a short introduction, in Martin Buber's *Der Jude* 4.6 (1919–1920). *Sha'ali Serufa* was written by Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215–1293) to commemorate the burning of the Torah in Paris in 1242.

13 The *petichtah*, or proem, to the midrash is a compositional form that allowed the rabbis to incorporate and link material from disparate scriptural contexts. Scholem's expression “entrance to the great lament” is his literal translation of the *petichtah* (“opening” or “entrance”) to *Lamentations Rabbah*. Scholem also refers to *Lamentations Rabbah* in “Ezekiel Ch. 19: A Lamentation for Israel's Last Princes” (*Tb2*, 548–550). The reference is to *Lamentations Rabbah* 1.16, in which God, rather than the people of Israel, is interpreted as the one who weeps. See Galit Hasan-Rokem's chapter in this volume for a discussion of the figure of the weeping God in *Lamentations Rabbah* (especially section 2.4, “Lamenting Goddess”).



## Gershom Scholem

# Job's Lament

This lamentation (the third chapter of Job)<sup>1</sup> is the clearest determination of the frontiers separating lament from accusation according to their original structure.<sup>2</sup> All lamentations according to their innermost essence accuse, and this one in particular, but they do so not by accusing any particular being – this is what is so particular in this kind of accusation – but rather language itself. In this song, which, according to its meaning, symbolically inaugurates a problem – it is situated at the beginning and as the introduction to Job's *didactic* poem! [*Lehr-gedichtes*] – the laws of lament are presented in a peculiar and penetrating manner. It is no longer an exterior sign in the construction, or something similar, which reveals the infinity and cyclical nature of annihilation; on the contrary, it is an extraordinary internal liquefaction of the poem, inextricably connected with the law of recurrence, which shows this to be lament. In the proper meaning of the poem, the question “why does He give light to the suffering?” is *not* posed in order to receive a response, at least not in the first place; rather, there is no response to this infinite, fundamentally recurring *plaintive* question (and precisely the book that follows confirms this most strongly).<sup>3</sup> The book of Job defines the profound link that exists between la-

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1 Scholem translated chapter 3 of Job into German, and he prepared these notes to follow his translation, most likely at the end of 1918. For the original German text of “Hiobs Klage,” see *Tb2*, 544–547.

2 Scholem builds on the fact that the words for lament [*Klage*] and accusation [*Anklage*] are related in German.

3 Scholem reflects on the rhetorical status of the lamenting question (i.e., the “how” [*eikhah*] or the “why,” as in “Why did he give light to the sufferer?”) in another short text, written in 1919, called “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” which makes reference to his interpretation of “Job's Lament” (*Tb2*, 522–532, translated into English by Eric J. Schwab in *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 [1999]: 353–361). In “On Jonah,” Scholem relates the unanswerable (rhetorical) question to an infinite cycle, since the answer to such a question would be another question. He argues for a link between the “innermost basis of Judaism” and this unanswerable question via an interpretation of the Hebrew word *Teshuvah*: “The Hebrew word for answer is *Teshuvah*, which, correctly translated, means: response, reversal – the reversal of the question, that is, which is assigned a new value and thus returns, as it were” (*Tb2*, 526). In this passage, as in his commentary on “Hiobs Klage,” Scholem describes the cyclical infinity of lament in terms of a law of recurrence – here principally connected to the rhetorical question, which is not raised and answered (this would complete the cycle) but rather is intensified, returning at a higher level. For more on the rhetorical question in lament, see Moshe Halbertal's essay in this volume, as well as Ferber 2013, esp. the section entitled “*Klage* and *Anklage*: Lament and Accusation,” which discusses the unanswerable question in “Hiobs Klage.”

ment and teaching, which has already been suggested, and which can be particularly developed on this occasion.<sup>4</sup>

Everything in this song recurs in ever-wider circles: the plaintive curse, the plaintive question and, of course, the conclusion, which itself expresses this reiteration (and which canonically expresses and exposes the linguistic structure of liquefaction). The epithets die, concentrically darkened.

Lament for the fact of being born is eternal. To be is to be the source of lament. Origin and border, as in birth in the sphere of life, converge in the sphere of language within lament. Birth and death, the fundamental symbolic poles [*Grundpunkte*] of life, reappear in the internal structure of lamentation. This must be systematically developed. To lament having been born means wishing for death, but not bringing it about. Judaism knows no more than *lamentation* for the fact of having been born. If it knew *more*, then suicide would have a legitimate place in Judaism. But in lament suicide is eliminated through a medium: the suicide of language is achievable (and may even be the source of reconciliation?). Language, which cannot mirror itself because it is itself a mirror, becomes lament. And therefore creatures [*die entstandenen Wesen*] lament their birth. This lament can be considered as the justification for another: the cries of those giving birth. He who curses his birth differentiates the inarticulate lament of his mother.<sup>5</sup>

Lament is an accusation that can never turn itself into a verdict. Thus the book of Job contains nothing more than the depositions of witnesses, but no verdict, because, in this book, God himself in the end remains a witness, albeit the *ultimate* witness, but not yet the judge. Yet, amongst everything that has a substance, *only* what is cyclical can escape transformation. A cyclical accusation, which is just what lament is, no longer belongs before a tribunal, whether

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4 Scholem is referring to his discussion of the relationship between lament and teaching in "On Lament and Lamentation."

5 Galit Hasan-Rokem discusses the mother's lament in her essay in this volume, but her position diverges sharply from Scholem's, and makes manifest some of Scholem's presuppositions about the relationships among gender, lament, and language. For Scholem, he who is born laments his own birth, thereby differentiating his mother's inarticulate cry from his own. Scholem envisions the emergence of language out of the mother's wordless cry as the son's utterance of a curse for his birth. The separation of voices is linked to the language of judgment – it is both an accusation and a retroactive justification – whereas the mother's lament is described as an indifferent cry of nature. For Hasan-Rokem, the mother's lament embodies a longing for inseparability with her child, in sharp contrast to the final separation of death. She insightfully argues that lamenting leaving this life mirrors the parting of bodies in birth, but because the lamenting mother yearns for the ideal of inseparability, Hasan-Rokem sees laments as life affirming.

it be human or divine (since even divine judgments are not provoked by lamentations; on the contrary, lament *follows* divine judgment, and therefore it has no place in a tribunal).

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Mathematical representation of lamentation as the passage of a function through the point of zero. Annihilation:  $X \times 0 = 0$ .

The violence of lamentation [is] well justified: it anticipates what could be the object of a subsequent lament. The mystical nature of lamentation compels this. The “wealth of images” of the songs of lamentation is nothing but apparent.

Gershom Scholem

## Translation of Job Chapter 3: Job's Lament

Untergehe der Tag  
da ich geboren bin  
und die Nacht die sprach  
empfangen ist ein Knabe.  
Jener Tag sei Finsternis.  
Nicht forsche nach ihm Gott von oben  
und nicht erscheine über ihm ein Licht.  
Einlösen mögen ihn Finsternis und tiefes Dürster  
lagern auf ihm Gewölke  
ihn schrecken Verfinsterungen am Tage.  
Jene Nacht sie nehme Dunkelheit  
nicht freue sie sich unter den Tagen des Jahres  
in die Zahl der Monde komme sie nicht.  
Ja jene Nacht sei unfruchtbar  
nicht komme Jubel in sie.  
Fluchen mögen ihr die Verflucher der Zeiten  
die bereit sind aufzuwecken den Leviathan.  
Finsternis seien die Sterne ihrer Dämmerung  
sie hoffe auf Licht – es sei nicht da  
und erschau nicht die Wimpern der Morgenröte  
darum daß sie nicht verschloß  
die Pforten meines Mutterschoßes  
und verbarg die Mühsal vor meinen Augen.  
Warum nicht vom Mutterleib an starb ich  
Verließ den Schoß nicht und verschied.  
Warum kamen mir Kniee entgegen  
und weshalb Brüste, daß ich sog,  
denn nun läge ich und wäre still  
ich schlief – hätte ich Ruhe<sup>1</sup>  
Mit Königen und Räten der Erde,  
die sich Grabdenkmäler erbaun  
oder mit Fürsten reich an Gold,  
die ihre Häuser anfüllen mit Silber.  
Oder was bin ich nicht wie eine Fehlgeburt verscharrt  
wie Kinder, die das Licht nicht schauten?  
Dort lassen Frevler ab vom Wüten,

Perish the day  
that I was born  
and the night that said  
conceived is a boy.  
That day be darkness.  
May God above not search for it  
and not shine a light upon it.  
May darkness and deep gloom reclaim it  
clouds settle over it  
the darkening of day terrify it.  
May that night be seized by darkness  
may it not rejoice among the days of the year  
may it not be included among the months of the year.  
Yes, that night be barren  
may rejoicing not enter it.  
May those who curse the times blaspheme it  
those that are ready to waken the Leviathan.  
Dark be the stars of its twilight  
it hopes for light – be it not there  
and let it not espy the lashes of dawn  
because it did not block  
the gates of my mother's womb  
and hide the trouble from my eyes.  
Why did I not emerge dead from the womb  
exit the womb not and expire.  
Why did knees come toward me  
and why breasts that I sucked  
for now I would lie and be silent  
I would sleep – I would have had peace  
with kings and counselors of the earth,  
who erect grave monuments for themselves  
or with nobles rich in gold,  
their houses filled with silver.  
Or why was I not disposed of like a stillbirth  
like children who did not see the light?  
There sinners abandon their rage,



und dort ruhen die matt an Kraft sind.<sup>2</sup>  
 Gefangene sind sorglos allzumal,  
 nicht hören sie die Stimme eines Fronherrn.  
 Klein und groß – dort sind sie [gleich]  
 und ein Knecht ist frei von seinem Herrn.  
 Warum gibt er den Mühseligen Licht  
 und Leben den Betrübten in der Seele?—  
 Die auf den Tod harren – und er ist nicht da  
 und nach ihm graben mehr als nach Schätzen,  
 die froh sind bis zum Jubel,  
 jauchzen, fänden sie ein Grab –  
 dem Manne, dessen Weg verborgen ist  
 und um den Gott einen Zaun gemacht?  
 Denn vor meinem Brote  
 Mein Stöhnen kommt,  
 und wie Wasser ergießt sich mein Heulen,  
 denn jede Angst kam über mich  
 und was ich fürchtete traf mich.  
 Nicht habe ich Frieden,  
 Nicht Ruhe und nicht Rast  
 Und wiederkehrt das Toben.

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1 As an alternative translation, Scholem wrote this line, “wäre Ruhe mir.”

2 It appears that the transcription in the published diaries mistakenly reads “rufen” [to call] instead of “ruhen,” which seems to be what Scholem wrote, and which is consistent with the original Hebrew. Lina Barouch has checked the original manuscript in the archive and has confirmed that in Scholem’s handwriting, the letters “f” and “h” are almost indistinguishable (National Library of Israel, Gershom Scholem Archive, Arc \*4 1599 08 277.4.18).

and there rest those feeble of strength.  
Prisoners are altogether carefree,  
not hearing the voice of a taskmaster.  
Small and great – here they are [alike]  
and a slave is free from his master.  
Why does he give light to the suffering  
and life to those afflicted in the soul?—  
To those who await death – and it is not there  
and who dig more for it than for treasure,  
who rejoice to the point of elation,  
who cheer to reach the grave –  
to the man whose way is concealed  
and whom God has hedged about?  
For before my bread  
comes my groaning,  
and like water my howls pour forth,  
for every fear came over me  
and what I dreaded struck me.  
I have no peace  
No rest and no halt  
and turmoil recurs.



Gershom Scholem

## Ezekiel Chapter 19: A Lamentation for Israel's Last Princes

I interpret the final remark in the following sense:<sup>1</sup> this song of lamentation (which is analogous to the *kinah* הִצְבִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל [*ha-tsvi israel*]) is not only intoned by the prophet, but it has truly “become lament,” that is to say it is sung as a lamentation by the Jews.<sup>2</sup> In a word, it has become an object of tradition. Another interpretation: this is a (prophetic) lament, and its contents, which it still has as a *prophecy*, are now fulfilled such that it has truly become a pure lament.<sup>3</sup> God namely calls the prophet to raise a lament (ch. 19, verse 1); the

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1 This is a translation of Scholem's remarks following his translation of Ezekiel 19. The manuscript is undated. The German original can be found in *Tb2*, 548–550.

2 In Scholem's original manuscript the Hebrew insertion הִצְבִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל [*ha-tsvi Israel*] could be mistaken for הִצְוִי יִשְׂרָאֵל [*ha-tsavui Israel*], since the letter *veth* in Scholem's handwriting appears very much like the letter *vav*. Indeed, the German edition of Scholem's journals quoted the original as הִצְוִי יִשְׂרָאֵל, transcribed and translated as *ha-tsavuy israel* [“Is it ordered to Israel”]. However, it is more likely that Scholem's intention was to insert the expression הִצְבִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל [*ha-tsvi Israel*], which is the commonly used reference to David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1.19): “A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen!” Scholem in fact translated this lament into German on 3 December 1917 (*Tb2*, 88). In his translation he interprets *ha-tsvi* [literally, “gazelle”] as “Schmuck” [jewel], which resonates with Luther's translation of *ha-tsvi* as “die Edelsten” [the most noble] (*Bibel* 1545, Web), later translated by Buber as “Zier” [jewel, adornment] (*Die Schrift*, 145). Scholem's comparison between Ezekiel 19 and *ha-tsvi israel* may be based, first of all, on the fact that both dirges bewail the deaths of Israel's rulers – kings and princes or governors. Moreover, Scholem alludes to the potential tributary functions of the same text. Whereas Ezekiel 19 is a prophetic lament (or, vice versa, a lamenting prophecy), David's dirge – most implicit in Scholem's reference – is both a genuine lament and a sign of his future accession to the throne. Credit for this annotation is due to Lina Barouch, who noticed this error in the German transcription and tracked down the original manuscript in the archive (National Library of Israel, Gershom Scholem Archive, Arc \*4 1599 08 277.4.17). We are also grateful to Moshe Halbertal, who seconded Barouch's initial hunch.

3 Scholem advances two different interpretations for the line, “Ein Klagelied ist dies und ward zum Klagelied.” First, he reads the distinction of tenses between “is a lament” and “has become a lament” as an indication that this lament has become an object of tradition, which amplifies Scholem's argument that there is a close relationship between lament and the transmissibility of teachings, already voiced in “On Lament and Lamentation.” Second, Scholem considers the two tenses of this sentence to be characteristic of the prophetic status of Ezekiel's lament. Prophecy, as he suggests, has two moments – its utterance and its fulfilment. Although Scholem regards the fulfilment of the prophecy as turning the prophetic lament into a “pure lament” (whatever “purity” means in this context), one could understand that the fulfilment

mythical phenomenon is incorporated into a multifaceted representation of the new religious universe of God. Generally speaking, in the Old Testament, it is ultimately *always God* who calls for lamentation: as a judge, he demands of men that they sign his verdict; this signature is lament.

But the divine call has yet another meaning: for God is not just the supreme judge, but is at the same time (something that Judaism never expressed directly, but which becomes very clear in the Talmudic aggadah) the one who is most profoundly accused: when God himself lamented the fall of the Temple, as it is told in the midrash *אֵיכָה רַבְתִּי* [*Eikhah rabbati*], this means that God himself is symbolically considered to be affected by a divine judgment, whose acknowledgment God requires of himself and of all creatures. There is nothing blasphemous in this view.<sup>4</sup> So too, the law (seen in a *theocratic context*) rests on the fact that God can be – in a purely *abstract* way – the object of an accusation, and justice rests on no sentence being carried out against him. God can never become the object of a *verdict*, because there is no *trial* for an *accusation* against God – such a trial is always ironic: Job. There are two relations of justice: justice toward [*gegen*] God, and justice before [*vor*] God. The justice *toward* God consists entirely in justice *toward* humans, and it is realizable; but *before* men, one cannot be just; neither is one just *before* God. *He who would be just before God would have to be more just than God.* This state of things rests on the deep Hebrew construction ... צַדִּיק מֵאֱלֹהִים [*tsadak me / more righteous than...*]: הָאֱנוֹשׁ מֵאֱלֹהִים [*ha-enosh me-eloah yitsdaq*] in Job 4.17. It can mean “is a man just [or righteous] before God,” or it can mean “is [there] a man more just than God, a man who is purer than his creator.” Double meaning.

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of the prophecy offers some hope and comfort, not only because it confirms a predictable and meaningful religious order, but also because the prophecy includes a prediction of renewal and restoration. Moshe Halbertal makes a version of this argument in “Eikhah and the Stance of Lamentation” in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem notes in the manuscript that he is referring to the Midrash *Eikhah Rabbah* 1.16, which interprets Jeremiah 8.22 as depicting God himself weeping. Scholem also cites this passage at the end of “On Lament and Lamentation” (see note 13 in that text). The reference is to the following verse from the Midrash (I.16): “For these things do I weep, / My eyes flow with tears. / Oh, that my head were water, My eyes a font of tears! / Then would I weep day and night / For the slain of my poor people” (Jeremiah 8.23). Scholem comments: “Who speaks this verse? If it is Jeremiah, how is it possible for him to go without food, drink, or sleep? The speaker of the verse is not he, but the Holy One Blessed Be He, for whom there is no sleep, as it is written, ‘Behold, the Keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps’ (Ps. 121.4).”



Gershom Scholem

## **Translation of Ezekiel Chapter 19: A Lamentation for Israel's Last Princes**

Wie war deine Mutter eine Löwin  
zwischen Löwen lagerte sie.  
Inmitten junger Löwen  
zog sie auf ihre Jungen.  
Da ließ sie aufwachsen einen ihrer Jungen  
ein Löwe ward er  
und lernte die Beute zu rauben,  
die Menschen fraß er.  
Da hörten ihn die Völker,  
in ihrer Grube ward er gefangen  
und brachten ihn in Ketten  
nach dem Lande Egypten.  
Da sah sie, daß sie (umsonst) geharrt,  
verloren war ihre Hoffnung.  
Da nahm sie ein anderes von ihren Jungen  
Zum Löwen machte sie ihn.  
Und er erging sich unter Löwen.  
Ein Löwe ward er  
und lernte die Beute zu rauben,  
die Menschen fraß er,  
er schändete ihre Witwen  
und ihre Städte zerstörte er.  
Da war erstarrt das Land und seine Fülle  
vor der Stimme seines Brüllens.  
Da entboten sie wider ihn Völker  
ringsum aus den Landen  
und breiteten aus wider ihn ihre Netze,  
in ihrer Grube ward er gefangen,  
und setzten ihn den Käfig in Ketten  
und brachten ihn zum König von Babel,  
sie brachte ihn auf Festungen,  
daß nicht gehört werde seine Stimme nah  
auf den Bergen Israels.  
Deine Mutter war wie der Weinstock in deiner Jugend  
an Wassern gepflanzt,

How your mother, a lioness,  
lay among lions.  
Amidst lion cubs  
she raised up her young.  
So she let one of her cubs grow up  
he became a lion  
and learned to hunt prey,  
he devoured men.  
When the nations heard of him,  
he became trapped in their pit  
and they brought him in shackles  
to the land of Egypt.  
When she saw that she waited (to no avail),  
her hope was lost.  
So she took another of her cubs  
and made him a lion.  
And he dwelled among lions.  
He became a lion  
and learned to hunt prey,  
he devoured men,  
and ravished their widows  
and he destroyed their cities.  
So the land and its fullness was petrified  
by the sound of his roaring.  
So the people from the nations all around  
bid against him  
and spread their nets out against him  
and he became trapped in their pit,  
and he was put in a cage with shackles  
and they brought him to the king of Babylon,  
they brought him to their fortresses,  
so that his voice would not be heard nearby,  
on the hills of Israel.  
Your mother was like the vine in your youth  
planted beside waters



fruchtbar und zweigereich  
war er von vielem Wasser.  
Da wurden seine kräftigen Zweige  
zu Szeptern der Herrscher,  
und ragte seine Gestalt  
hinaus zwischen dem Laubwerk  
und war sichtbar ob seiner Höhe,  
ob der Fülle seiner Ranken.  
Da ward er ausgerissen, wütend  
zur Erde ward er geschleudert,  
und der Ostwind ließ seine Frucht verdorren  
sie fielen ab und verdorren,  
der Zweig seiner Kraft –  
Feuer fraß ihn.  
Und nun ist er gepflanzt in die Wüste,  
in ein Land von Dürre und Durst,  
und aus ging Feuer von Geäst seiner Zweige,  
ihre Frucht fraß es auf,  
und nicht blieb an ihm ein Zweig der Kraft,  
ein Szepter zu herrschen.  
Ein Klagelied ist dies und ward zum Klagelied.

it was made fertile and rich with branches  
from abundant waters.  
So her mighty branches became  
fit for the scepters of rulers,  
its stature towered  
above all among the foliage  
and was conspicuous because of its height,  
by the abundance of its tendrils.  
Then it was plucked out, irately  
it was hurled to the ground,  
and the east wind let its fruits wither,  
they fell off and withered,  
the branch of her might –  
fire devoured it.  
And now it is planted in the desert,  
in a land of drought and thirst,  
and fire has issued from the twigs of its branches  
and has consumed their fruit,  
and not a branch of might remains  
a scepter with which to rule.  
This is a lamentation and has become a lamentation.



Gershom Scholem

## A Medieval Lamentation

The following is a translation of the lament (*kinah*) known by its opening words as “*Sha’ali Serufa*.”<sup>1</sup> It stems from the middle of the thirteenth century. Its motive was the burning of the books of written and oral Torah in Paris in *Tamuz* 1242 (more recently 1254). The author is now generally acknowledged to have been Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, the famous late Tossafist of the German school.<sup>2</sup>

The original, which belongs to the group of laments known as the *Zionide*, and which exhibits the hard joining [*harte Fügung*] of the Northern-French/German *piyut*, has the continuous suffix-rhyme scheme characteristic of all the laments in this group: *ayikh*.<sup>3</sup> The translation forgoes this characteristic rhyme-scheme on principle, since its essence in the *Zionide* is based throughout on the aural relationship between the aforementioned suffix-rhyme and the origi-

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1 This was the only text on lament that Scholem published during his lifetime. The text, including the introduction, appeared in *Der Jude: Eine Monatsschrift* 4.6 (1919–1920): 283–86, under the title “Ein mittelalterliches Klagelied.” This translation is based on the version included in Scholem’s diaries, *Tb2*, 607–611, which contains a postscript that was not published in *Der Jude*. Scholem translated the lament of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg on April 23, 1919, in Bern, and offered it to Martin Buber for publication in *Der Jude* in a letter from May 1919 (*Briefe* 1, no. 76: 204). The first version of the translation, including the postscript, is a six-page manuscript found in Scholem’s literary remains, bearing the title “Die Kinah des R. Meir von Rothenburg / Über die Verbrennung der Thora (in Paris 1242).” Along with differences in punctuation, there are minor variations and additions in the manuscript version that do not appear in the printed version. These have been noted by the editors of the German edition of Scholem’s diaries, and are reproduced in this translation. Scholem’s own notes to the translation appear in the printed version, but not in the manuscript. Following the convention used in the German edition, asterisks indicate a note by Scholem in the printed version.

2 The Tossafists (Talmud commentators) were a medieval rabbinical school that originated in Germany and spread to France. During the Crusade of 1096, the Tossafist schools in Germany (in Speyer, Mainz, and Worms) were completely destroyed. The Tossafist writings of the German school were able to survive only because of the establishment of centers of Torah study in France. As Scholem notes, *Sha’ali serufa ba-esh* [“Ask, you who were burnt in the fire”] was written by Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215–1293) to commemorate the burning of the Torah in Paris in 1242. The book burnings were part of a systematic attempt by the Church to gather and destroy all of the books of the Oral Law in Paris and throughout Europe.

3 As noted in our introduction to the translations, the expression “harte Fügung” was an allusion to a phrase in von Hellingrath’s 1911 introduction to Hölderlin’s translations of Pindar. For a discussion of Hölderlin’s “hard joining” as it relates to the tradition of elegy, see Daniel Weidner’s chapter in this volume.

nal canonical lament sound, *eikhah* (“how”), a relationship for which no parallel *can* be given in German. The rhyme of these poems is a symbol for the fundamental infinity of lament, and it seems that the only translation that would have a hope of making the force of these laments visible in German would be one that, instead of seeking these unreachable symbols at any price, even that of abandoning the linguistic essence of lament, aims to eliminate these symbols through the purest possible accentuation of the words, and their inner infinite intensification.



Gershom Scholem

## **Translation of Sha'ali Serufa: A Medieval Lamentation**

Frage, im Feuer Verbrannte,  
nach der Trauernden Wohl,  
die zu wohnen verlangen  
im Hof deiner heiligen Wohnung,  
die schmachten im Staube der Erde  
und leiden,  
die verstört sind  
ob des Brands deiner Rollen,  
die verdüstert gehen  
und ohne Glanz  
und hoffen auf Tageslicht,  
das über ihnen erstrahle und dir –  
nach dem Wohle des stöhnenden Menschen,  
der weinet, zerbrochenen Herzens,  
immer klagt,  
um den Krampf deiner Wunden,  
der Klage anhebt wie Schakale und Strauße  
und aufruft zur bitteren Trauer um dich:  
Wie ward die in zehrendem Feuer gegebne  
von irdischem Feuer verzehrt  
und nicht verbrannten  
die Fremden an deinen Flammen.  
Wie lange, Prangende  
wohnest du noch in vielfachem Glück,  
und das Antlitz meiner Blumen –  
bedecken es nicht deine Dornen.  
Du sitztest in großem Hochmut,  
Die Kinder Gottes zu richten  
nach anderer Satzung  
und bringst sie vor deine Richter?  
Noch verhängst du Brand  
Über das Feuergesetz und die Satzung.  
Und darum: Heil dem,  
der dir deine Taten bezahlt.  
Mein Fels – gab er in Feuer und Flammen

Question, burnt in the fire,  
 about the wellbeing of the mourners,  
 who long to live  
 in the courtyard of your holy abode,  
 who languish in the dust of the earth  
 and suffer,  
 who are disturbed  
 by the burning of your scrolls  
 they are darkened,  
 without a glimmer,  
 and hope for daylight  
 to shine upon them and you –  
 about the wellbeing of the groaning man,  
 who cries, broken-hearted,  
 constantly lamenting  
 the pangs of your wounds,  
 the lament rising like jackals and  
 ostriches  
 and calling in bitter mourning for you:  
 How can that which was given in consuming fire  
 be consumed by earthly fire  
 and the strangers were not burnt by your flames.  
 And how long, resplendent one<sup>1</sup>  
 will you live in manifold happiness  
 and the countenance of my flowers –  
 is not covered by your thorns.  
 You sit in great arrogance,  
 to judge the children of God  
 according to other laws  
 and you bring them before your judges?  
 For now you decree to burn  
 the fiery law and ordinance.  
 And therefore: hail him  
 that repays your deed in kind.  
 My rock – were you given in fire and flames,



Dich, Thora, dafür,  
 Daß einstmals Feuer  
 entbrenne an deinen Säumen?  
 Sinai, hat für dies dich Gott erwählt  
 und Größere verworfen  
 und ist erstrahlt in deinen Grenzen  
 als Zeichen und Gesetz,  
 daß sie gering werde und sinke  
 von ihrer Herrlichkeit –  
 so will ich dir dein Gleichnis sagen,  
 das Gleichnis von dem König,  
 der zum Geburtsmahl seines Sohnes weinte  
 da er das Sterben sah – so bist du auch.  
 Statt deines Prunkrocks  
 bedecke dich, Sinai, mit Sack  
 hülle dich ins Kleid der Witwenschaft  
 und tausche deine Gewänder.  
 Tränen will ich vergießen,  
 Daß wie ein Bach sie seien  
 und strömen zu den Gräbern  
 deiner beiden edlen Fürsten  
 Mose und Aharon auf dem Berge Hor,  
 und ich will fragen:  
 Gibt es eine neue Thora,  
 also daß deine Rollen man verbrannt hat?  
 Siwan und Tammus haben sich verbunden,  
 Deine Anmut zu verderben  
 Und ganz die Krone deiner Schönheit;  
 Die Tafeln sind zerbrochen,  
 und da es\* seine Torheit wiederholte,  
 verbrannte im Feuer das Gesetz.  
 Ist dies die doppelte\*\* Vergeltung?  
 Meine Seele ist entsetzt  
 und wie kann meinen Gaumen Speise freuen,  
 nachdem ich sah,  
 wie deine Güter eingesammelt wurden  
 zum Markte wie eine Verstoßene,

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\* Israel

\*\* Isaiah 40:2.

Torah, so that  
 the fire of yore  
 would burn your hem?  
 Sinai, did God choose you for this  
 and reject higher [mountains]  
 resplendent within your borders  
 as a sign and law  
 so that it would be humble and fall  
 from its grandeur –  
 thus I want to tell you of your parable –  
 a parable about the king  
 who cried on the feast for his son's birth  
 having foreseen his death – this is also how you are.  
 Instead of stately robes  
 dress yourself, Sinai, in sackcloth,  
 wrap yourself in the dress of widowhood  
 and change your garments.  
 I will pour tears  
 that should be like a brook  
 and gush over the graves  
 of your noble princes  
 Moses and Aaron on Mount Hor,  
 and I will ask:  
 is there a new Torah,  
 is that why your scrolls were burnt?  
 Sivan and Tamuz have joined together<sup>2</sup>  
 to spoil your grace  
 and the whole crown of your beauty;  
 the tablets are shattered,  
 and since it\* repeated its knavishness,  
 its law was burnt in the fire.  
 Is this the doubled\*\* recompense?  
 My soul is appalled  
 and how can my palette take pleasure in food,  
 after I saw  
 that your goods were gathered  
 to market like a castaway,

und das Gut des Höchsten verbrannten,  
 die du verwirfst,  
 in deine Gemeinde zu kommen.  
 Ich weiß keinen Weg mehr zu finden,  
 die du gebahnet, sind traurig worden,  
 der redliche Pfad deiner Bahn.  
 Meinem Mund soll süßer sein als Honig  
 Der Trank der Tränen  
 und mein Fuß gefesselt sein  
 in deinen Banden.  
 Meine Augen sollen gerne schöpfen  
 die Wasser meiner Tränen,  
 bis sie für alle hinreichen,  
 die an dem Saum deines Gewandes halten.  
 Aber sie trocknen,  
 da sie über meine Wangen fließen,  
 denn mein Erbarmen ist entbrannt  
 über die Unrast deines Herren.  
 Er nahm den silbernen Beutel,  
 ging den Weg weit fort<sup>3</sup>  
 und mit ihm, ach, entflohen deine Schatten.  
 Und ich bin kinderlos und unfruchtbar  
 allein ohne sie geblieben  
 wie ein Zeichenmast  
 auf dem Gipfel deiner hohen Berge.  
 Ich höre nicht mehr die Stimme  
 der Sänger und Sängerinnen,  
 denn zersprungen sind  
 die Saiten deiner Harfen.  
 Ich kleide mich und hülle mich in Sack,  
 denn mir sind sehr kostbar und teuer,  
 die Zahlreich sind wie Sand,  
 die Seelen deiner Toten.  
 Ich staune sehr über das Licht des Tages,  
 das allein aufgeht,  
 aber Dunkel bringt es mir und dir.  
 Schreie mit bitterer Stimme zum Fels  
 über dein Unglück und dein Leid,  
 vielleicht gedenkt er der Liebe deiner Brautzeit.  
 Umgürte dich mit härenem Gewand,

and the good of the highest burnt  
 by those you rejected  
 from entering your community.  
 I can no longer find a path,  
 those that you channeled have become sorrowful,  
 the honest trails of your way.  
 Sweeter to my mouth than honey  
 shall be the drink of tears  
 and my feet are bound  
 in your chains.  
 My eyes shall gladly draw  
 enough water from tears  
 to suffice  
 for all those who cling to the hem of your robe.  
 But they dry  
 as they flow down my cheek,  
 since my pity is blazing  
 for the agitation of your Lord.  
 He took his silver pouch,  
 and went far hence  
 and with him, ay, have fled your  
 shadows.  
 And I stayed childless and barren  
 alone without them  
 like a signal mast  
 on the peak of your high mountains.  
 I no longer hear the voice  
 of your singers and songstresses  
 for the strings of your harps have split.  
 I will clothe and shroud myself in sackcloth,  
 since the souls of your dead  
 more numerous than grains of sand  
 are precious and dear to me.  
 I am quite astonished by the light of day,  
 which rises by itself,  
 but brings darkness to me and you.  
 Cry with a bitter voice to the cliff  
 over your unhappiness and pain,  
 perhaps he will remember the love of your betrothal.  
 Gird yourself in a sack garment,

denn ein Brand ist aufgeflammt  
und verdarb deine Höhen.  
Nach den Tagen deines Leides  
tröste dich Gott  
und wende die Gefangenschaft  
der Stämme Jeschuruns  
und erhöhe deine Armen.  
Du schmückst dich noch  
mit purpurnem Schmuck,  
und Pauken nimmst du,  
gehest hin im Reigen:  
so jubele in deinen Reigen.  
Erhoben ist mein Herz,  
wenn der Fels dir leuchtet  
und deiner Dunkelheit erglänzt:  
so strahlen deine Finsternisse.

since a fire has flamed up  
 and destroyed your heights.  
 After the days of your suffering  
 God shall console you  
 and commute the captivity  
 of the tribes of Yeshurun  
 and lift up your poor.  
 You will yet adorn yourself  
 with purple jewels,  
 and take up the timbrel,  
 and march around in a ring,  
 so rejoice in your dance.  
 My heart is uplifted,  
 when the cliff illuminates you  
 and your darkness shines:  
 irradiating your gloom.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Scholem added a note in the manuscript version highlighting the wordplay between *ad an* (how long) and *adina* (noble or adorned [*Edle*]). The wordplay brings out the simultaneity of two different perspectives: the perspective of pagan power and luxuriousness is juxtaposed with a vision of this condition as temporally limited. The technique thus picks up on the “point of coincidence” between lament and prophecy that Scholem highlights in his postscript to the translation.

2 Sivan, the ninth month, was when the Torah was given. In Tamuz, the tenth, the tablets were shattered.

3 In the manuscript version, instead of the words “weit fort” Scholem uses “fernhin.”

4 Throughout this translation, Scholem repeatedly uses the verb “Erstrahlen” or “Strahlen,” which refers to the radiance of God. The suffering Jewish community is described as living in darkness, without a glimpse of the light of day; God has withdrawn his radiance: “ohne Glanz und hoffen auf Tageslicht das über ihnen erstrahle [...]”. But in the last sentence, Scholem transforms the metaphor and brings forth the paradoxical image of radiant darkness: “und deiner Dunkelheit erglänzt: / so strahlen deine Finsternisse.” This image of radiant darkness is one that Scholem also uses in his “Ninety-Five Theses on Judaism and Zionism” (1918): “Nur in der Klage strahlt das Dunkel” [“Only in lament does darkness radiate”] (*Tb2*, 306).



Gershom Scholem

## **Scholem's postscript in the manuscript version**

The medieval lamentation stands in this particular paradox: it originates from the coincidence of lament, prophecy, and confession [*Bekennntnis*]. To show the death of lament in each of these poems is just as easy as to show its immortal life: but the problem is the actual possibility of this point of coincidence, which turns these songs into great poems. (If one failed to recognize this point, one would rightfully take them to be trivial and secondary.) Seen linguistically: through a somehow undecided battle (and this *indecision* is precisely its form!), lament draws consolation and joy, in a word, redemption, into its domain. It is perhaps also more: an attempt at ironic lament – an enormous potentiation in which language is not only annihilated, but even ridiculed, insofar as redemption itself is implicated in the irony. But in any case, in this attempt, an even greater historical order, unknown to poetry, has been breached: for as the unity of Jewish history is not only ironic, but also always violent [*gewaltsam*], so is the unity of the later קִינָה (*kinah*, *Klage*) also a symbol of exile [*Verbannung*].





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